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## **The Victimization of the African Girl Child: Primary Schools as Unsafe Spaces for Girls in Cameroon**

Sandra Bume Nambangi  
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**The Victimization of the African Girl Child:  
Primary Schools as Unsafe Spaces for Girls in Cameroon**

*By*

**Sandra Bume Nambangi**

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Science  
in  
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at

Minnesota State University, Mankato  
Mankato, Minnesota

May 2020

May 2020

**The Victimization of the African Girl Child: Primary Schools as Unsafe Spaces for Girls in Cameroon.**

Sandra Bume Nambangi

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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Dr. Maria Bevacqua, Advisor

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Dr. Ana Perez, Committee Member

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Dr. Agnes Odinga, Committee Member

### **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to Mrs. Elizabeth Baliki Nambangi, my mother.

Mum, you are a gem.

## Acknowledgement

“It takes a village to raise a child.” (African Proverb)

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to so many individuals who assisted me in one way or the other, to make this project a success. Their intellectual, technical, and moral support made it possible for me to keep believing in my abilities and keep pushing forward. Though it is practically impossible to mention each person by name in this short acknowledgement, it does not mean that I value their assistance any less.

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## Abstract

Violence against girls in and out of school settings is a problem that is on the rise in countries of sub-Saharan Africa. In Cameroon today, the abuse of girls has progressed into the realm of primary education affecting prepubescent girls, making schools unsafe spaces for girls and thereby, hindering them from accessing and furthering their education, basic rights and agency. A study on the victimization of primary school girls in Malawi funded by the United Nations found that girls are subject to several forms of violence as a result of their gender and that this disrupts their access to basic education (Bisika, Ntata and Konyani 2009). This study also established that there are various forms of violence against girls; prominent among these are beatings, sexual assault and rape by both boys and teachers, and discriminatory classroom practices that favor boys (ibid). Using this study as a basis for comparison with the situation in my country Cameroon, I argue that many girl children in Cameroon also suffer similar abuse today, and that the UN Millennium Development Goals of 2000 that aimed at ending gender-based violence, extreme poverty, and promoting primary education for girls in its Member States by 2015, which was the basis the Malawian study was carried out, have not been realized. Focusing on Cameroon and using a qualitative approach of data analysis, I use secondary data analysis that build upon Girls Studies, Gender-Based Violence and Third World/African feminisms. These theoretical frameworks help situate the African girl child in a global space that is unfavorable to her political and personal advancement. In order to examine the situation of the girl child in Cameroon, I make use of semi-structured interviews with grassroots advocates for girl child empowerment in Cameroon. This study therefore aims to understand whether Cameroonian girls experience the same kinds of abuse as girls of other African countries; whether abuse inhibits girls' access to primary education, and how grassroots advocates are involved in preventing or responding to abuse of girls.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL.....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM .....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>APPENDIX C: EMAIL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT.....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>APPENDIX D: TELEPHONE RECRUITMENT SCRIPT .....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>101</b>

### **List of Abbreviations**

CHRNA	Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa
ExSSA	Ex-Saker Students' Association
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations Organization
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization
WWI	World War One or First World War
WWII	World War Two or Second World War



## **Chapter One: Introduction**

The purpose of this research study is to establish the kinds of abuse girls experience in Cameroon and whether abuse inhibits girls from accessing primary education and their personal agency. The research questions that guide this study include: 1. What are the contributing factors to the victimization of girls in parts of Cameroon? 2. Does the abuse of girls inhibit their access to basic education? 3. How are grassroots advocates involved in elimination violence against girls, and promoting education for all girls in Cameroon?

While researching violence against girls and the role of transnational feminism in Africa, I came across a study that revealed very disturbing details on the abuse of girls in parts of Africa. The cause of my alarm was a study done at Center for Social Research, University of Malawi, Department of Sociology by three researchers, Thomas Bisika, Pierson Ntata, and Sidon Konyani, titled “Gender-violence and education in Malawi: a study of violence against girls as an obstruction to universal primary school education” in 2009. This research study was funded by Actionaid and UNICEF, following the call of the United Nations on its member states to eliminate violence against girls and to make safe primary school education for girls in their countries by the year 2015. This UN project was called the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Bisika and colleagues, in collaboration with the University of Malawi set out to investigate the reasons why the abuse of Malawian girls is prevalent. Thus, their aim was to investigate the causes of the high occurrence of abuse of Malawian girls, why there is a disparity in girls’ access to

primary education, and how these all connect to obstruct girls' access to primary education in Malawi.

What particularly alarmed me was the severity of the abuses faced by primary school girls in Malawi. Bisika and colleagues carried out their primary data collection using focus groups and questionnaires. They targeted 1500 households across the three regions of Malawi. They successfully reached a girl or young woman in 1496 households. Their results were staggering: the forms of violence against girls in Malawi as established through the focus group discussions and questionnaires included, "beatings, punitive labor, food withholding, sexual assault and rape, forced marriage, parental neglect, verbal abuse, enforced isolation, social ostracism, and denial of access to education (Bisika 2009, 290)." Similarly, the results showed that the types of violence experienced by girls at school included: "corporal punishments, beatings by both boys and teachers, verbal abuse by both boys and teachers, sexual assault and rape by both boys and teachers, inappropriate touching and discriminatory classroom practices" (290). Other abuse experienced by Malawian girls among many others included: "girls being forced to do chores for teachers", and "girls being stripped of their clothes by teachers for arriving late at school" (290). It is therefore understandable that Malawian girls either avoid attending school, or they are unenrolled. The abuse they experience in and out of primary schools is not only alarming, it also inhibits their access to education.

Using the Malawian situation as foundation for this research study, my aim is, therefore, to determine if Cameroonian girls are victims of abuse similar to those experienced by girls in Malawi. My purpose is also to understand the types of abuse that girl

children face, and to establish whether abuse inhibits girls' from accessing basic education and agency. The difficulty in investigating the aim of this research lies in the fact that there are no comprehensive studies that have been done in the English language on the abuse of girl children in Cameroon. This gap in scholarship on the abuse of the girl child in Cameroon is one that I attempt to fill with this research project. Therefore, I make use of semi-structured interviews with girl child advocates working with two non-governmental organizations in Cameroon, in order to ascertain how these advocates are engaged in empowering girl children.

The bodies of knowledge that ground this research study are Girls/Girlhood Studies, Third World/African feminisms, and Gender-Based Violence, and all three overlap in this research to make a case for the underprivileged African girl child who is burdened with barriers that stem from her sociopolitical and geographical location in the Global South. These bodies of knowledge will be discussed in the literature review section.

### **Historical Background**

The Republic of Cameroon is in sub-Saharan Africa and is located in the west-central region of the continent. It is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, Nigeria, Chad, the Central African Republic, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. Its best-known feature is Mount Cameroon, the highest mountain in sub-Saharan Africa, named by Portuguese explorers in 1472 as the "Chariot of the Gods." (Anyangwe 2009). From the seventeenth century, an influx of European explorers and missionaries began settling in the coastal region known then as Amba Bay. Among them was the British Baptist Reverend Alfred Saker, who in

1858 bought this region from the King of Bimbia and renamed it Victoria after the then reigning monarch Queen Victoria. From then on, the British monarchy claimed the region as part of their jurisdiction. This act of land acquisition from local chiefs for their European countries of origin, became a common practice with these explorers and is known historically as the European Scramble for Africa (Anyangwe 2009).

Parts of the Southern Regions of Cameroon were purchased by German explorers in 1884, thereby leading to conflict with Britain. The Germans renamed this region “Kamerun,” taken from the name *Rio dos Cameroes* (“River of Prawns”), given by early Portuguese explorers to the Wouri river that runs through the region. Britain retained its possession of the territory until 1887 when they ceded their claim to Germany, who then occupied the area until 1902 (Anyangwe 2009; Awoh 2012).

German control of “Kamerun” was peaceful, effective, and progressive until 1916 when the French and British forces overpowered Germany and seized their territories after World War I (WWI) (Anyangwe 2009). Traces of German occupation can still be seen today in the architecture and infrastructure found in Buea and Limbe (the former Victoria) in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. After they lost WWI, all German colonies were unequally divided between Britain and France under the Anglo-French Agreement of 1916. This led to the birth of “The Cameroons,” the English version of “Kamerun” (Awoh 2012) Thus, what is known today as the Republic of Cameroon (or “Cameroun” in French) is a combination of the territories colonized by the French and the British. This diversity in colonial masters has given the country and its people a unique heritage that has contributed to the richness of their culture. With over two hundred and fifty

indigenous languages (Anchimbe 2013), a population of approximately 26 million people, two official foreign languages (French and English), and with traces of its German heritage, Cameroon is dynamic and unique among African nations. Today, Cameroon enjoys multilingualism, multi-ethnicism and a culture rich in diversity.

Cameroon gained its independence from Britain and France in 1961 but maintained the British and French systems of government in the regions they colonized (Mougoué 2017). English is the official language of Southern Cameroons, which is made up of two regions, and French is the official language in the other eight regions. Cameroonians in both French and English regions are encouraged to be bilingual.

As far as literacy rates are concerned, Cameroon has lower literacy rates for women resulting from low school attendance rates for girls. In 2010, literacy rates varied substantially by gender from fifteen years and older: 82.63 percent of males were literate while only 71.59 percent of females could read and write (uis.unesco.org 2020). In keeping with the demands of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDG), Cameroon has made significant changes in its educational system. Among these goals are calls for Member States, "to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger," "to achieve universal primary education," and "to promote gender equality and empower women" in a fifteen year-time frame from 2000 to 2015 (WHO MDG 2019). Cameroon still faces certain obstacles in implementing of these goals. These setbacks, especially as they concern girl children in Cameroon, will be discussed in this study.

As compared to Cameroon, the situation of Malawi is quite similar. Malawi is a country from which a comprehensive UN study on violence against girls and its effect on

girls' access to primary education was conducted. This UN report on Malawi is the foundation on which the situation of Cameroonian girls will be evaluated (Bisika, Ntata and Konyani 2009).

Malawi is situated in southeastern Africa and has great similarities with Cameroon. As a British colony between the years 1891 and 1964, Nyasaland, now Malawi, was a British stronghold for many years and only developed anti-colonial forms of resistance after the First World War (Banda and Brenard 2019). Even before obtaining independence in 1964, and despite being a signatory state, Malawi did not sign the 1961 UNESCO's Pan African Conference Declaration on Education, which advocated for free and universal primary education by 1980 (Banda and Brenard 2019). The issue of free primary education only gained importance in the early 1990s when this became a political issue as parents were over-burdened with numerous expenses associated with educating their children. Due to school fees, school uniforms, textbooks, and other necessary materials, the financial burden became so great that parents could not afford to send their children to school (2019). As a result, there was a great decline in primary school enrollment. With the UN MDGs signed in September 2000, Malawi finally engaged in the discourse of making accessible free primary education to all children. In order to attain this UN goal, Malawi has provided free primary education for both boys and girls since 1994 (Banda and Brenard 2019).

The implementation of free primary education saw a dramatic rise in primary school enrollment, especially with girls who had been left to stay at home. According to Banda and Brenard (2019), girls' enrollment increased two-fold as compared to boys, and

the demand for qualified teachers posed a major setback because schools were forced to employ unqualified teachers to meet the demand. Despite free enrollment, severe poverty, limited resources, and untrained teachers still make access to primary education very challenging for young girls in Malawi (Banda and Brenard 2019), just as the case of Cameroon is equally challenging.

As far as the victimization of girls in and out of primary schools in Cameroon is concerned, it is worth mentioning that the constitution of Cameroon has a clause that addresses the rape of women and youths. The Cameroon penal code states that any person who forces a woman to have sexual intercourse with him will be sentenced to five to ten years in prison (Adams 2003).

The Cameroonian Penal Code [CRLP/ACAFEJ English version] "punishes any person who by physical or moral violence forces a woman, including an adolescent, to have sexual relations with him. The punishment is imprisonment of five to ten years" (CRLP/ACAFEJ 2000, 13). Furthermore, incest is punished by a term of imprisonment of one to three years and a fine ranging from 20,000 CFA francs (US\$31.84) to 500,000 CFA francs (US\$795.94) (ibid.). On the issue of marital rape, [CRLP/ACAFEJ English version] "legal opinion in Cameroon appears to be divided, and case law reflects a cautious attitude" (UNHCR 2020).

Despite this law, girls in Cameroon are being held back from accessing primary education in its full capacity as a result of abuse that is punishable by Cameroonian law. According to researcher Lawal and Okoro (2010), Cameroonian girls are victimized threefold: through extreme poverty, through early marriages, and through statutory rape

(2010). It must be mentioned that this study only covered one region in Cameroon, which is the Adamawa Region in the north of the country. Therefore, the results are not inclusive of all other nine regions that make up Cameroon. There are many other factors that prevent this law from being effective in Cameroon, and that is one of the issues this research investigates.

Similar to Cameroon, there exists statute law protecting children from sexual abuse and violence in Malawi.

Sexual Violence, and in particular rape, is criminalized by law under the state's Penal Code (section 132) as well as in Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Law (Section 62). The penal code, defines rape as "any person who has unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman or girl, without her consent, or with her consent if the consent is obtained by force or means of threats or intimidation of any kind, or by fear of bodily harm, or by means of false representations as to the nature of the act," excluding the potential for men or boys to be victims of rape. The offence is punishable with death or imprisonment for life with or without corporal punishment (Penal Code, 1930). In Malawi, rape is widespread, where reportedly rape arrests and convictions were an almost a daily occurrence (US Department of State, 2017) (Social Institution and Gender Index 2020).

In addition, due to severe poverty, girls are vulnerable to exploitation by old men, termed "sugar daddies" who finance their education in exchange for sex. Thus, girls are at great risk of unwanted pregnancies and becoming school dropouts (Ager and Ager 2008). It is rather unfortunate that Malawian girls still suffer abuse many years after the UN MDGs.



The situation in other African countries seems to be similar and for this reason, this research study examines the Cameroonian case in order to determine the types of violence that girls experience, and if this abuse affects their education and thereby preventing them from attaining their agency.

### **Gender-Roles**

My research has shown that the entity known as a girl child is simply a young female child. Therefore, an African girl child would refer to a young African female child. Since my research is on primary schools in Africa, my definition of a girl child and an African girl child would encompass all girls who are below the age of fifteen. This is due to the fact that in Africa, especially in the rural areas in Cameroon that are covered in this research, it is common to find girls up to the age of fifteen who are still in primary schools (Devlin 2004). This is partly due to the socialization process of children in Cameroon and other countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

Girls in sub-Saharan Africa, between the ages of five and fifteen are socialized differently from boys. This is seen in the household duties they are given from very young ages. In Cameroon, girl children are brought up with a heavy emphasis on their roles as women. They must learn from their mothers how to be masters at running a household. This means that chores such as cooking, cleaning, washing, and serving the male members of the household are of utmost importance. A well-brought up girl in Cameroon is one who has been trained by her mother or by other female family representatives to be a proper future wife. Boys, on the other hand, are brought to be just like their fathers. They are trained to understand their role as breadwinners of their family

thus they spend most of their times out of the household learning from their fathers how to be men. It is for these very defined gender roles that girls find themselves at home doing chores while boys go to school to learn so as to have a bright future and to be able to support their future families financially. For this reason, it is not uncommon to find girls of age fifteen still attending primary school. This delay in school attendance for girls has various causes. The gender roles assigned to girls in the household is just one factor that hinders girls from timely school enrollment. Other factors include poverty, lack of accessible schools, reluctance of parents to educate girls, favoritism of male children in the family, and lack of education on the part of the parents. Gender roles therefore play a major role in the socialization of girls in Cameroon societies. Girls are mostly disadvantaged as they are seen as basically not as important to the upkeep of the family and the society as boys are. In addition, girls experience gender-based violence, which also plays a major role in the socialization of girls in these regions.

### **Contextualizing Gender-Based Violence (GBV)**

What is understood by gender-based violence and how does it influence girls' status in African societies? In the years following the UN's establishment of the Millennium Development Goals, there emerged a growing recognition that violence represents a serious violation of women's human rights (Watts and Zimmerman 2002). This is because there has been an increase "in the evidence of the extent of violence perpetuated against women in the past twenty years" (Watts and Zimmerman 2002, 1232). International organizations such as the UN, The World Health Organization (WHO), and many other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and human rights scholars, all began to

investigate and report on violence against women worldwide, with the aim of identifying the existing categories of violence against women and finding solutions on how to end it. In order for this goal to be realized, there had to be an understanding of the definition of violence, the types of violence against women and girls that exist, and who the perpetrators of gender-based violence are considered to be. For the purposes of this research, the definitions of violence will center around violence against women and violence against girls.

The WHO in its Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014 (GSRVP) defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force, threatened or actual, against oneself, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (GSRVP 84). This is the definition that my research on violence against the Cameroon girl child falls back on, because it encompasses a spectrum of possibilities through which a girl child can be violated.

Some authors have grappled with the interchangeability in the use of the term “gender-based violence” with the term “violence against women,” although they argue that “violence against women” is a limited concept that addresses only violence perpetrated against women (Rutherford et al 2007). Nevertheless, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) states that one of the most prevalent human rights violations in the world today is that of violence against women and girls. The UNFPA accurately surmises that gender-based violence is an act that undermines the dignity, health, security and autonomy of its victims, but also remains shrouded in a culture of silence. The results of gender-based

violence could be extreme because victims could suffer from health and reproductive consequences which could include unwanted pregnancies, which could lead to unwanted abortions, trauma, and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS (UNFPA GBV 2017).

Similarly, other researchers, either working in collaboration with the UN, WHO, UNICEF or independently, have defined gender-based violence as a term that recognizes that violence occurs within the context of women's and girls' subordinate status in society and serves to maintain the unequal balance of power between males and females. Therefore, violence against women is seen not only as a manifestation of gender inequality, but it also serves to maintain this unequal balance of power (Rutherford et al 2007, 677; Watts and Zimmerman 2002).

Coming back to the interchangeability of the term “gender-based violence” with “violence against women,” Rutherford “et al” use the WHO definition which defines gender-based violence as “any act of gender-based violence that result in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (Rutherford et al 2007, 677). They use this definition in other to emphasize how important it is to distinguish violence against women from violence against girls.

Thus, actions that constitute violence against girls among others, include “rape, forcing a child to touch another individual sexually, exposure to or participation in pornography, and forcing a child to have sex with another person” (Watts and Zimmerman 2002, 1235). Oftentimes such acts occur between a child and an adult otherwise termed

statutory rape, but it can also occur between a child and a peer, as we see in the case of Malawi. Apart from sexual violence, other forms of violence against girls in Africa include physical violence by an adult caregiver or by an adult in the community, intimate partner violence in cases of early marriages (Stark “et al” 2019), beatings, child labor and exploitation, harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and breast ironing, kidnapping, selling off girls into marriage, selling off girls into child prostitution by militant groups such as Boko Haram and other sex traffickers (Council on Foreign Relations 2018). For the purposes of this research, the definitions of violence against girls will focus on those committed to a girl by an adult or a peer or by community regulations.

In the long run, gender-based violence has become a phenomenon that affects women and girls of every descent, but especially, gender-based violence is prevalent among the vulnerable populations. Reports show that women and girls are the most at risk of, and most affected by gender-based violence; other groups such as gay and transgender people, boys, and even men, also experience gender-based violence. In the case study of Malawi, the fear of gender-based violence forces girls to stay away from schools, thereby hindering their access to education. The consequences of gender-based violence are wide and far reaching. For this reason, this research is dedicated to highlighting the ills of gender-based violence and to evaluate and reflect on the works of local NGOs and their investment in ending gender-based violence in primary schools specifically in Cameroon. How the cycle of violence is perpetuated is also of great importance to this study.

### **Types of Violence against Women and Girls**

Investigations, reports, and evaluations of the types of violence against women and girls on a global level make a distinction between physical, sexual, psychological deprivation and neglect (Rutherford et al, 2007). Amrita Basu writes that,

the year 1993 marked a turning point for women's human rights movement, for during that year the Vienna Human Rights Declaration and Program Action and the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women recognized violence against women as a human rights abuse and defined gender violence to include violence against women in the public and the private sphere (Basu 2000, 74).

Krug "et al" explore the WHO World report on violence and health done in Geneva 2002 and they catalogue a typology of violence. Violence could be self-directly, interpersonal, or collective. These could be broken down into categories such as self-abuse, family or partner abuse, community abuse and social, political and economic abuse. These are further subdivided into child, partner, elder, acquaintance and stranger abuse (2002). For the purpose of this research, and in order to have a basis for comparison with the situation in Cameroon, I will concentrate on such abuse that is experienced by primary school girls in Malawi. Abuse of primary school girls in Malawi include beatings by both boys and teachers, sexual assault and rape by both boys and male teachers, forced marriage, denial of access to education, discriminatory classroom practices, inappropriate touching, harassment, torture, isolation, and parental neglect (Bisika et al 2009). Other international

organizations support this in their research on the reasons why girls are discriminated against: “Barriers such as child marriage, harassment and violence, and social discrimination keep girls from long-term, quality education, perpetuating poverty and increasing girls’ health risks and social disenfranchisement” (Global Initiative for the Education and Literacy of African Girls 2020). According to the United Nation’s Population Fund, one in three women have experienced physical or sexualized violence in their lifetime. These statistics do not include emotional, financial, or verbal abuse. Gender-based violence is unfortunately still mostly underreported due to the stigma and shame for the victim that is associated to it, and also due to lack of access to resources and support systems (unfpa.org GBV 2019). As a result of this stigma and other setbacks, girls, in the communities of Cameroon face many barriers that hinder their access to formal education. These setbacks will be the context of analysis of upcoming chapters.

### **Organization of Chapters**

Chapter Two discusses the methods I used to conduct this research project. Chapter Three is the literature review, where I review relevant scholarship that has been produced in the fields of Gender-Based Violence, Girls/Girlhood Studies and Third World/African feminisms as they relate to the victimization of the African girl child. Chapter Four I discuss the results of my research by analyzing the interviews I conducted with grassroots advocates working with girls in Cameroon. Their assessment of the kinds of violence girls face in Cameroon, and how abuse inhibits girls’ access to education is the main component of this chapter. Here, I also explore how these grassroots advocates are engaged in ending gender-based violence and violence against girls. In Chapter Five, I discuss the

conclusions of my research. I establish the solutions as proposed by grassroots advocates on how to tackle violence against girls and promote education, and I make useful suggestions on what future research on this topic could possibly concentrate on.



## **Chapter Two: Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the kinds of violence that primary school girls in Cameroon encounter and to determine whether this abuse inhibits girls' access to primary education. I am directed in this study by three pertinent questions; first, what kinds of abuse or violence do girl children experience in Cameroon? Second, does this abuse obstruct girls' participation in basic education? Third, how are grassroots advocates for girls involved in elimination violence against girls? While the world at large is concerned with the status of girl children as seen through the yearly celebration of the girl child by the United Nations, my study pays attention to how grassroot advocates are engaged in empowering Cameroonian girls. My hypothesis states that primary schools are unsafe spaces for girls in Cameroon and I use a qualitative style of data analysis to investigate this assertion.

### **Methods**

I conducted semi-structured interviews through Zoom video conferencing and over the telephone with four staff members of two local NGOs that advocate for girls in the cities of Yaoundé, in the Central Region and Buea, in the Southwest Region of Cameroon.

#### ***Recruitment***

All participants or interviewees were identified for this study because of their advocacy work with girls in Cameroon. For this purpose, I had prepared three scripts: An Email Recruitment Script (Appendix C), A Telephone Recruitment Script (Appendix D), and an Interview Questions Script (Appendix E). I used the recruitment scripts to recruit participants for my interviews and I used the Interview Questions Script to guide my interviews.

Additionally, I also prepared a Consent Form (Appendix B) that participants signed before they could be interviewed for my project. Once these Consent Forms were signed and returned to me via email, I conducted the interviews at the times the participants had indicated.

Participants/interviewees were staff members of advocacy organizations working with girls in Cameroon and I identified them through their organizations' social media pages, which provided their email addresses and telephone numbers. I then recruited four participants from two grassroots NGOs using my prepared Email and Telephone Recruitment Scripts. I conducted all interviews in a quiet study room at the Memorial library at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

### ***Data Collection***

Due to time constraints, I could not travel to Cameroon to conduct my interviews on site. I am certain field work would have broadened my spectrum of gaining more participants and observing these advocates in their daily work. Nevertheless, I conducted my interviews through Zoom video conferencing and over the telephone. I gave my participants the choice of which medium to use for the interviews and most of them chose to be interviewed over the phone. I also gave them the choice to remain anonymous so as to avoid unforeseen difficulties with people or institutions they work with, that may arise as a result of the interviews. Interestingly, all of my interviewees refused to work anonymously because as I came to understand, these girl child advocates are doing humanitarian work and empowering girls and women, thus they intend for their endeavors to gain critical exposure because it is for the greater good of Cameroonian girls. I also gave my participants

the choice to decide if they would like to be audio recorded or not. All of my participants equally accepted to be audio recorded.

By using a feminist method of semi-structured interviews, I could conduct the interviews in such a way that allowed for follow-up or clarification questions when they were needed. Using my Interview Questions Script as guide, I made sure that I covered all seven questions no matter the order in which my interviewees answered them. What was important to me as a feminist researcher was that the specific content of each question was attended to and that I could ask follow-up or clarification questions as the interview progressed. It was also important that I had some control of the interview process. I acquired some control of the interview process by first of all coming up with my seven open-ended interview questions, and later by controlling the direction the interview was taking while I conducted the interview. My use of the feminist research method of semi-structured interviews is in accordance with the advantages of a semi-structured interview as explained in *Feminist Research Practice* (Hesses-Biber 2014). Semi-structured interviews gave me and my participants room for spontaneity because my agenda was not tightly determined. I had some control of how the interview was being conducted, and my interviewees had some control of how they answered the questions and what information they gave to me (2014). Semi-structured interviews were most appropriate for this study because they allowed me to have a glimpse in the lived experiences of my interviewees.

Semi-structured interviews also allowed me to record the authentic voices of my interviewees since they were not constrained by a rigid closed-ended questioning and a structured agenda. A structured interview would have limited my participants' ability to

be spontaneous, as I would have had complete control of the interview process because my goal would have been to go through my questions in the order they are presented. Using a semi-structured interview method provided my project with a more valuable and authentic result because my interviewees reported their honest experiences to me.

At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself and gave a short summary of my project. I explained the purpose of my project and why I found it important to document the reasons why girls in Cameroon stay out of primary schools. I also reviewed the Consent Form with the interviewees, so as not to overlook the importance of having their consent before commencing with the interview. Thereafter, I gave the interviewees time to ask questions about the Consent Form, and I clarified any points that were unclear.

I also explained to my interviewees that any participant who did not wish to be audio-recorded could still participate by dictating their answers to me. To facilitate this process, I forwarded my prepared Interview Questions Script to participants three days before the interview date, so that they could prepare their answers and then dictate them to me during the interview. In this case, I wrote down the answers word for word, because I needed to accurately document their answers so as to secure the authenticity of my interviews. After each dictated answer, I read my written answers back to the interviewee for confirmation.

Our medium of communication during my interviews was the English language because I focused on recruiting only English language speakers, therefore, there were no language barriers. Cameroon is a bilingual country where English and French are the official languages. Since this thesis is being written in the English language, I chose to

interview only participants whose first language is English so as to avoid losing valuable material during translation from French into English, had the interviews been conducted in French. My interviewees were in Cameroon and spoke with me over the phone or through Zoom video conferencing. I asked the NGO staff members who participated in the interviews seven open-ended questions intended to throw light on their work with girls in Cameroon. Questions were based on their everyday advocacy work. The questions all focused on this work only. Participants were not asked questions about their own experience, if any, of abuse. Each interview took approximately one hour. When this time was up, and more questions were left, I only proceeded if the interviewee agreed to going over time. I used a digital voice recorder to record my interviews.

### *Analysis*

Immediately after I had conducted an interview, I transcribed it and secured the recording as explained in my Consent Form. These transcripts of my interviews, along with other relevant statistics found on authorized data sources, were the documents I used for my data analysis in chapters four and five.

Through these interviews, I could get an understanding of whether abuse inhibits girls' access to primary education, and an understanding of how grassroots advocates are involved in preventing or responding to abuse of girls. By the end of all interviews, I had gotten a detailed representation of the types of abuse that primary school girls in parts of Cameroon experience. I was also able to determine whether the abuse inhibits girls' access to primary education and understand the ways grassroots advocates are involved in

preventing or responding to abuse of girls. These results will be presented in chapters four and five.

### ***Positionality***

My first and most impactful experience with violence against girls in Cameroon occurred in my all-girls boarding school one fateful night. I was in form four which is the equivalent of ninth grade in the U.S system of education. One night, while all girls were in their dorms sleeping, a form one girl, that is a sixth grader, went to use the restroom, which was in a separate building adjacent to the dorms. We were woken up by a loud commotion and alarm being raised by the night watchman, and bitter wailing from a girl. Most of us woke up and looked outside through the windows and saw that a young girl wrapped in a bloody loincloth was being carried to our vice principal's house. Simultaneously, the watchman shouted for male teachers who lived in the teachers' quarters across from the dorms to wake up and join him in searching for a rapist.

Our school was in a secluded area of the town, built on a hill with nothing but trees and a deep valley surrounding it on the one side. On the other side were homes of school staff, and the main entrance that opened up into the town of Limbe. The side bordered by the valley was the most secure part of the school because the valley served as natural protection from the town beyond. In the forty plus years that the girls' boarding school had existed, no one had ever succeeded in crossing that valley from either side. The valley was very steep, filled with trees, stones, and thorny shrubs. So, we were all in shock when we learned that a man had conquered that valley, snatched a girl from the restroom, dragged her down the valley, raped her, wrapped her in her bloody loincloth,

carried her up the valley, and placed her besides the restroom. That was where the night watchman found her screaming and shouting. By the time the male teachers rushed into the valley, the perpetrator had long since gone.

Most of us girls were not only traumatized as we learned of this violation of a girl child, but we were filled with fear because our once secure school premises were no longer secure. The principal called for an emergency evacuation of the school premises and we were only permitted to return after a fence had been put up separating the school from the valley. The victimized girl never returned to school.

This violation did not happen to me personally, but the trauma of that experience laid the foundation for my interest in engaging in the fight to end gender-based violence.

My interest in the victimization of the Cameroonian girl child stems from the fact that I am Cameroonian. As a native of Cameroon, and a black woman who once was an African girl child, I have taken a keen interest in the status of the disadvantaged African girl with the aim of empowering and educating her through my engagement as a feminist scholar. I have seen what abuse, violence, poverty, ignorance and illiteracy has done and is still doing to girls in my country. I count myself privileged to come from a background of educated and progressive parents, especially as my father was the first male feminist I ever encountered. My father was a man who insisted on educating all of his children equally. He practiced monogamy in a society that did not understand his motivation. He stayed married to my mother till his death in 1998, made sure all four daughters and four sons with his wife, my mother, all got a university education. He was a man who lived beyond his time.

I equally count myself privileged to have a mother who not only practices African feminist methods as described by Cruz (2015), but is a community leader, a women's advocate and a motivator and coordinator of *njange* or rotating credit associations in our community of Big Bekondo. My mother is a retired teacher who now lives on the income from accumulated property she and my father acquired over many years. They were such a forward-thinking pair that my mother does not have to worry about her livelihood now that she is advanced in age. My mother has kept on practicing a feminist lifestyle by engaging and providing for children who are destitute. Since all of her children are grown and live away from home, my mother has taken over the upbringing and education of her diseased sister's children, her cousin's children and other relatives' children as well. At any given time in the past twenty or so years, my mother had and still has at least six children of relatives in her home, who do not have the means of catering for their children. Her philanthropic, charity-giving, humanitarian heart has made her a matriarch in our community. Even in an advanced age, my mother still practices African feminist methods of community living. She feeds the hungry whenever she can, she feeds strangers and relatives alike during festive seasons such as Easter, Christmas and other public holidays. She has her home doors open during these times of the year for all those who may stop by. This background as portrayed by my parents, has shaped my views and my need to better the situation of girls in my community.

Additionally, living in Europe and America has added to my view and heightened my awareness of the different ways in which girls are victimized in my country. While attending graduate school in Germany, I became aware of the differences that were



apparent in girls' behavior when girls know their rights. Abuse of personal rights and space is frowned upon and not accepted. German girl children differed in their behavior and self-esteem from girls from immigrant families stemming from Morocco, Turkey, and from countries of sub-Saharan Africa. While living in the United States, I have observed that girls from immigrant families have similar self-esteem issues as their counterparts in their home countries. This is due to the socialization processes of their parents, especially if these parents embody the traditional ways of life from their homeland. As a result, I have realized that the abuse of Cameroonian girl children is not restricted to the homeland but exists in the diaspora. Luckily for Cameroonian girl children living in the US, the laws that govern the upbringing of children in this country also protects the rights of all immigrant children. Abuse is curbed but still exists in ways that are traditional.

I have been engaged in girl child issues from the time I moved from Cameroon to Germany, and then to the US. One way I have done so is by getting involved in the activities that concern girl children. After the 2019 United Nations International Day of the Girl, an occasion which is celebrated every year on the eleventh of October, the issue of the disenfranchised African girl child has been at the forefront of conversations held in every organization that seeks to empower the girl of the underdeveloped countries. By African girl child, I am referring to the dark-skinned girl, age below fifteen years, born to any of the forty-six countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Gender-based violence exists in a very high rate in Africa and its eradication seems impossible, but could become a possibility, if everyone - to paraphrase Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie - could

be a feminist; the kind of feminist who is concerned with correcting and eradicating injustices, especially those that affect vulnerable children.

I belong to an association of former students of a prominent all-girls boarding school in Cameroon, Saker Baptist College, which got its name from the Baptist missionary Alfred Saker, who settled in the then Ambas Bay region in 1858 (Anyangwe 2009). Our alumni association goes by the acronym ExSSA International, short for Ex-Saker Students' Association, with branches in the United States, Europe and Africa. We also go by the name "Sakerettes" but unlike ExSSA, "Sakerettes" is used to refer to both current students of the institution as well as its former students. This organization is dedicated to empowering the African girl both in Cameroon and abroad. As a result, the "International Day of the Girl" is one that ExSSAns all over the world join the United Nations in celebrating the Day of the Girl. Members of our group were present at the United Nations offices in New York and took part in the "Day of the Girl Summit 2019," while others engaged in humanitarian activities such as supporting the homeless, promoting education by partnering with JUMP Africa and Books for Africa, and helping to ship thousands of books to several countries in Africa (twitter.com 2019). On day nine of the International Day of the Girl 2019, ExSSA International were engaged with answering the question: how can adults be allies with youth, to create a positive change (Dayofthegirlsummit.org 2019)?

Being an alumni association, ExSSA provides financial, infrastructural and educational support to our alma mater. We have projects that each chapter finances every year, to make improvements in our former school (ExSSA USA 2020). We collect yearly

contributions from each member, and this is pooled into a project fund that goes for the improvement of our former school. This past year for instance, my group ExSSA Minnesota completed a project of financing lawn mowers and donating them to Saker Baptist College. This will aid the school and the students by making their physical labor lighter and reduce the rate of accidents because the grass lawns are still being cut manually by schoolgirls using cutlasses. Also, every second Saturday of April is set aside by our organization as our “Impact Day.” On this day in last year, I joined my group of ExSSA Minnesota and volunteered at “Feed My Starving Children” in Minneapolis. Thus, we participate in charity work, we empower girls by supporting them financially through scholarships, we improve on the infrastructure of our school, and we assist by paying tuition for academically strong students who come from struggling backgrounds (Dayofthegirlsummit.org 2020).

### ***Limitations***

This research study came with limitations that are threefold. First, there is little or no secondary source material existing on this topic concerning Cameroon. Second, my personal lack of qualification and training in conducting person-to-person interviews with minor girls. Third, organization of telephone or Zoom interviews with participants in Cameroon was time consuming and problematic.

First, my secondary data analysis of library data basis revealed a limited amount of scholarship that address the situation of girl child accessibility to education in Cameroon. Some scholars have identified this problem when they write that “Cameroon does not have a plethora of publications and material on girls’ education to be found

elsewhere” (Cammish and Brock 1994, 234). Existing scholarship either makes a comparison between one region of Cameroon and one region of Nigeria that border each other and have similarities in colonial history, language, and religion (Lawal and Okoro 2010), or concentrates on the Far North Region which is highly underdeveloped and populated by people of the Islam religion who do not believe in educating girls (Cammish and Brock 1994; Van Santen 2010). This lack of scholarship on the Cameroonian girl child in education influenced my decision to conduct interviews with advocates for girl child empowerment, in order to evaluate the situation in other regions of Cameroon, especially my region of origin, which is the Southwest Region.

Second, due to time constraints, I could not travel to Cameroon to conduct my interviews on site. I am sure field work would have broadened my spectrum of gaining more participants as I may have used questionnaires for this project. I chose to interview grassroots advocates who work with primary school girls because they are trained in advocacy work and can share their experiences and impart knowledge on how they have been tackling the problem of violence against girls. These grassroots advocates could also shed light on the reasons why there is a disparity between girls’ and boys’ access to primary school education. Additionally, grassroots advocates work with girls and their parents, thus they have the legal backing through the parents when they interact with minors. I am not qualified to talk directly with these girls, since they are minors and I have no training on working with minors who have experienced sexual abuse, sexual assault and other forms of gender-based violence. I operate ultimately as a student researcher.

Third, the scheduling of the interviews and time constraints posed some difficulties. All of my participants work during the day and had to carve out extra time to talk with me considering the time difference Cameroon and Minnesota. One of my participants could only do the interview at 2 AM in Cameroon, which was 8 PM Minnesota time. This was because she could not interview with me during her working hours, and also because internet connection during the day is very problematic in Cameroon. My participant explained that it is during the nighttime that we could get a clear connection.

Furthermore, since I interviewed two advocates each from two different NGOs, the information I received from participants from the same organization is similar. The perspectives of advocates only differ on the level of the kind of field work they are engaged in, and especially in the regions they work in. Buea and Yaoundé are two cities that are diverse both in the language spoken and in their economy. Buea is a small town and the capital of the Southwest Region, English spoken, while Yaoundé is the capital city of the country and French spoken. Thus, mentalities and ways of lives are very different.

### Chapter Three: Literature Review

The objective of this research study is to determine the types of abuse that girls face in Cameroon and to determine if abuse hinders girls from accessing primary education and thereby robbing them of their agency. This literature review is therefore designed to examine major scholarly works that have been produced in the feminist disciplines of Gender-Based Violence, Girls Studies, and African/Third World feminisms, as they pertain to my research. These three bodies of knowledge frame this research study and are instrumental in evaluating the background of the abuse of Cameroonian girls. These bodies of knowledge also serve the purpose of contextualizing the socio-economic situation of the African girl child, and thus placing her in a geographical space that is unfavorable for her personal growth. Gender-Based Violence frames this thesis in a way that exposes the difference inherent in violence against women, and violence against girls. These differences are strengthened and made obvious through the new feminist discipline of Girls Studies.

In this literature review, the existence of Girls Studies in the Western world and in some parts of the Global South aim to expose a gap in feminist studies that this thesis endeavors to fill. The absence of Girl Studies in Cameroon despite the presence of many philanthropic grassroot activist groups who advocate for and empower girls in many regions of the country is one that this also study addresses. Scholarships on Girls/Girlhood Studies make a case for how the issues of girls are different from those of women, as evident in the field of women's studies. Therefore, the field of Transnational feminism, here substituted by Third World/African feminisms, presents scholarships that address the

relevance of these feminisms in the lives of Cameroonian girl children. How have these feminisms helped shape the realities of the Cameroonian girl child?

### **Gender-Based Violence and Violence Against Girls**

It bares highlighting that there is a major gap in the existing literature regarding gender-based violence in primary schools in Cameroon. As a result, this study attempts to fill that gap, but first, I will review existing scholarship that has paid attention to violence against girl children in Africa.

The phenomenon of gender-based violence and violence against girls in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa has been explored by many scholars who are concerned with gender inequalities. Most of these scholars center their research around systems of injustice and inequality that oppress and inadvertently harm the African girl child. Judith-Ann Walker (2012) writes of the harmful effects that early marriages can have in the lives of girl children. Sub-Saharan African girls are often forced into early marriages (that is, marriage of girls below the age of fifteen) and this negatively impacts their health, education, and economic well-being. Walker presents statistics of girls who marry below the age of eighteen and the figures show a high prevalence for Cameroon which stands at 47.2 percent (2012).

The causes for these early marriages for girl children according to Walker, are based on cultural, historical, religious, economic, and sociological factors that influence the girl child's experiences in rural Cameroon and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. Early marriages play a fundamental role in patriarchal systems. Fathers' patriarchal rights over their daughters are transferred in such societies oftentimes to an older male in the

community through the rights of marriage. Through this act, a father can solidify his family's rank in the society and secure binding relationships with members of his community (Walker 2012). Noteworthy here is the fact that the girl child has no influence in the decisions about her life. Fathers and mothers make these decisions for their girl children who are raised to obey parental orders and succumb to familial expectations.

Poverty is one of the main reasons Walker finds for the prevalence of early marriages. Families experiencing extreme poverty see the birth of a girl child on the one hand, as an opportunity to become connected to a richer family through marriage, or a girl child could be married off even before puberty in order to relieve the family of extra burdens of providing that particular child on the other hand (Walker 2012). Early marriage is harmful for the development of the girl for various reasons; early marriage means exposure to sexual relationships, most often with older more experienced men, and consequently result in early parenthood. Girl children of below the age of fifteen are particularly vulnerable and are five times more likely to die from childbirth than older girls (Walker 2012). In addition to that, girls in early marriages are particularly exposed to diseases such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmittable diseases as they experience their first sexual encounter with adult men who are mostly in polygamous lifestyles (Walker 2012).

Early marriages and child bride culture reveals another dimension of child abuse, that of forced marriage. Most of these girl children are forced into marriages at a tender age and into polygamous homes (Walker 2012). Additionally, they are pulled out of school in order to become child brides. This setback not only puts a stop into the girl



child's education, but also exposes her to other abuses such as domestic violence, and a life of drudgery as she navigates being a wife, mother, and a co-wife.

Walker (2012) concludes her article with a look at actions in place to mitigate some of these abuses against the girl child; legal and policy interventions that aim at eliminating early marriages in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. There has been an influx of programs that sensitize the population on the need for girl child education all over Africa. Some of these interventions aim at educating parents on the ills of early marriages, while emphasizing the importance of educating the girl child (Walker 2012). In Cameroon for instance, there has been an increasing growth of child empowerment programs that aim to elevate and improve the status of Cameroonian girl children, especially as under Cameroon law, girls can legally be married at the age of fifteen (Walker 2012).

Other researchers concerned about gender-based violence in African settings especially as it affects the girl child's access to primary education focus on other causes of disparity. Lawal and Okoro (2010), basing their research on Cameroon and Nigeria, determine that "girl-child participation in primary education in both countries is not encouraging" (233). They are in accord with Judith-Ann Walker's (2012) assessment that early marriages hinder the girl child's access to primary education, but they go further to point out other factors that work against and contribute to the abuse of the girl child. In Cameroon and Nigeria, Lawal and Okoro found out that distance to schools can be a major obstacle for girls. They cite evidence from the 2003 UNESCO report that states that in low-income countries such as Cameroon and Nigeria, distance to school make it difficult for girls to attend school (Lawal and Okoro 2010). This gives parents the excuse to keep the

girl child at home to do housework while they send the boys to school which is their preference. These communities see girls as being of less value than boys and treats them as such. Girls carry out domestic, agricultural work, and help in taking care of their siblings or catering to the men in the family, while boys are sent to school to earn professional degrees and learn how to do men's work (Lawal and Okoro 2010).

Amira Y. Badri examines the case of school-based violence in Sudan. She reveals that not only are girl children victimized, abused and violated in school settings, they are equally abused out of school, on the way to school and at home (2014). Badri documents different types of violence against girls and creates categories under which they fall: violence between peers, and violence between teachers and students, and these range from beatings, sexual harassment, bullying, rape, other forms of sexual assault, and even death (2014). In identifying the basis for these patterns of violence against girls, Badri hones-in on one of the most important causes of gender-based violence, which is the socialization process of boys and girls in Africa. In Sudan as well as in other sub-Saharan African countries, gender-based discrimination is encouraged. Males have power over females and females are expected to accept and encourage male domination to the extent that it is females who discipline other females when they fail to submit to the males in their communities (2014). Consequently,

it is considered acceptable for men to control women ... parents to control children through violence and threats of violence, hence considered normal and even commendable for both adults and children to use similar attitudes and methods in school settings (Badri 2014, 4).

Besides the physical, psychological and emotional abuse, corporal punishment is another obstacle to girls' participation in primary school education. This degrading form of punishment - corporal punishment according to Badri is a regular form of disciplining children in African settings. This can take the form of blows to the head, slaps, whipping, beatings with sticks and belts. Additionally, the use of verbal threats and insults on children is common among parents and teachers (Badri 2014). Badri documents countries that are notorious for using corporal punishment on children in Africa and these include Senegal in the lead with 55 percent, followed by Benin 54.8 percent. In the Central African Republic Badri states that 52 percent of teachers in primary schools inflict corporal punishment on a daily basis (2014).

Additionally, sexual violence is one of the forms of primary school-based violence that is most prevalent in African countries. Sexual violence exists in all forms beginning with sexual abuse and extending to sexual exploitation (Badri 2014). Sexual violence intensifies in secondary school settings where both boys and men are perpetrators as Badri documents. In Cameroon, Badri notes that 30 percent of girls who experience sexual violence are abused by their male peers. In Ghana, 82.1 percent of the perpetrators of sexual abuse on girls are boys as well. In Central African Republic, 24 percent of schoolboys have accepted that they have raped a girl or taken part in gang rape. In Niger 88 percent of teachers and 42.2 percent in Senegal are identified as perpetrators of rape, sexual harassment and violence committed against secondary school girls. Sexual violence perpetrators are identified as males of all ages, and in school settings, boys, teachers and other school personnel commit these abuses against girls (Badri 2014). This

signifies that sexual violence in all its forms is an obstacle to girls' access to education because it obstructs their school attendance. Girls avoid attending school out of fear of sexual violence. Consequently, opportunities for girls' completion of their education are limited. In addition, girls tend to drop out of school or fail to participate in class. This trend definitely aids in inhibiting girls from attaining basic education and achieving their agency.

Since gender-based violence negatively affects girls' physical and psychological well-being, Badri calls for both men and boys to join the fight against all forms of violence against girls and to actively participate in breaking the cycle of violence against girls and women (2014).

As far as the abuse of primary school girls is concerned, especially in rural areas in Cameroon, available literature mostly deals with the low rates of enrollment of girls and the geographical, sociocultural, and economic factors that play a role in girls' enrollment. Cammish and Brock (1994) record the setbacks that girls face in some regions in Cameroon and expound on the ideas of early marriage as it relates to bride price, to the preference of educating boys over girls, to the subordinate status of girls in these communities, and to gender roles (Cammish and Brock 1994). Since women and girls play a major role in sustaining the economy and households, their roles as homemakers are deemed more valuable than their need for education. It is for this reason that in communities where bride price is a major part of the tradition of marriage, girls are seen as an asset to their families (Cammish and Brock 1994). Girls will bring the family financial security when married off, especially if married to a person of a higher economic status.

Gender-based violence as portrayed by Cammish and Brock (1994) paints the Cameroonian girl child as a victim of circumstances. The perpetrators of abuse against the girl child are not tangible entities that can be singled out but are systems of injustice and inequalities that have been operational for generations. The traditional values such as bride price payments are hard to break since these serves various purposes: to enrich the family, secure protection for the girl, and to secure social status for her family especially if she marries into a rich household. The Cameroonian girl is a victim of poverty, and a victim of circumstances and traditions because she is abused by the systems of power that surround her, thereby placing her in a geographically and economically violent surrounding that perpetrates her victimization. The girl child is valuable for housework, farm work, and for bringing in wealth through her bride price (Cammish and Brock 1994), and this renders her helpless and open to all forms of abuse and injustice.

### **Girls/Girlhood Studies**

Scholarship on Girls/Girlhood Studies has mainly focused on the development and the establishment of the field as an interdisciplinary field that has its roots in Women and Gender Studies, and also in youth and boyhood studies. These investigative studies on the field have traced its history from the eighteenth century to the present day with emphasis on the gradual establishment of the importance of girls' experiences in their society. Studies have not only paid attention to the development of Girls Studies in Western societies, but also in the Global South with evidence found in literary works from Zimbabwe and South Africa. However, the discipline of Girls Studies still does not exist in

Cameroon's higher education even though Gender and Women's Studies as an interdisciplinary field already exists at the University of Buea, Cameroon. Using Girls Studies as a theoretical background for this research opens up the possibility of a new field for Cameroon universities, especially as the education of the girl child has taken the forefront of international discourse. Thus, in the event that Girls Studies be introduced to Cameroon's higher education, it is important that I point out that girls in Cameroonian society occupy a unique position that is defined by their gender roles, traditions and culture. Girls Studies will therefore have to be implemented in the context of Cameroonian understanding of the place girls occupy in their communities by highlighting pertinent issues related to girls.

Prominent scholars of the interdisciplinary field of Girls Studies have traced the origin of this discipline to the 1990s, a period closely associated with the Third Wave of feminism. Mary Celeste Kearney in "Coalescing: The Development of Girls' Studies" examines how girls have been marginalized in fields such as youth and feminist research in the years before the 1990s, and how changes within the field of feminist studies gradually progressed during the 1990s to include girls (2009).

Historically, girls have been marginalized in every aspect of life as they occupied subordinate position and secondary spaces at home and in the communities. Kearney makes a distinction between the gender roles of boys and girls which only gradually changed in the late twentieth century. Boys have maintained their prominent positions in societies and thus were exposed to scholars who could explore and document the roles boys played in their societies. Girls, on the other hand, being in the periphery of life, were

left out of scholarly works and therefore scarcely featured in literature produced (Kearney 2009). This suggests that traditional gender roles in the global north were practically what they still are in countries of the sub-Saharan. Boys' lives were easily accessible due to their involvement in school and other activities outside of the domestic sphere (Kearney 2009).

Further explanation about the absence or marginal presence of girls in youth research points to the stereotypical image of women influenced by sexism and patriarchy that were always present in such research. Where girls were mentioned, Kearney argues, they were fleetingly presented or constructed in such a way that stereotypes about women's roles were reiterated and perpetuated (2009).

In addition to that, scholars who were interested in representing females in their works were researchers in the area of sex and gender, but they paid less attention to the age of the females they wrote about (Kearney 2009). As a result, girls in youth research and in feminist scholarship were mostly invisible in the literature before the 1990s because these disciplines directed their interest either at boys or at women respectively.

The marginalization of girls in youth literature points to systems such as patriarchy at work but begs the question why girls are also exempted from feminist scholarship. Girls Studies scholars have placed the blame on the adult-centrism of feminism. Kearney writes that

Feminists have a lengthy tradition of uneasy identification and, sometimes, dis-identification with girls, which unfortunately has led many women activists to

believe, albeit often unconsciously, that girls are irrelevant to feminist politics and scholarship (Kearney 2009, 6).

Despite this disidentification with girls in the feminist movement, Kearney also explains that as far back as the eighteenth century, some prominent thinkers included girls when they mentioned the term “women” and advocated for them as well (2009). This was mostly due to the fact that girls in bourgeois families had access to an elevated form of life as compared to poor girls who worked as servants for the bourgeoisie. Upper class girls could access education as they benefited from feminist education reform (Kearney 2009).

In further development, during the 1960s and 1970s, feminists began rejecting the term “girl” due to its implication that women were dependent and subordinate (Kearney 2009). This had to do with the popular trend that proclaimed the ideal modern subject as white, heterosexual, bourgeois, Western and Christian male. Feminists felt the need to distinguish between the terms “girls” and “women” because of the negative connotation of weakness associated with the term “girls” (2009). In so doing, the feminist movement failed to acknowledge the uniqueness inherent in girls’ experiences (2009).

Another reason for the exclusion of girls from the field of Feminist Studies was found in the objectives for the founding of the interdisciplinary field of Women’s Studies. The birth of the academic field of Women’s Studies in the 1970s brought with it the quest for equality and the need for acceptance of the important role women played in society. Thus, Women’s Studies paid close attention to raising awareness about the academic, intellectual and humanitarian contributions made by women in their society (Kearney



2009). Since the public sphere posed as a source for their search for women's involvement in the society, girls' contributions were overlooked and feminist scholars unconsciously left girls out of the field of Women's Studies.

Similar to Kearney, other Girls Studies scholars have charted the evolution of Girlhood Studies as an academic field and an activist area, but they have paid closer attention to the relationship between Girlhood Studies, Women's Studies, and Gender Studies. In relation to boyhood studies and youth studies, Claudia Mitchell searches for the place that Girlhood Studies occupy in Women and Gender studies (Mitchell 2016). One approach she uses is citing authors such as McRobbie and Garber (1981, 1991) who have written about boys but include the notion of adolescent girls and bedroom culture, and how girls are commodified in romance literature and magazines (Mitchell 2016). Mitchell applauds McRobbie and Garber for their effort at putting in the forefront girls' agency in their works (Mitchell 2016). Subsequently and unlike Kearney, Mitchell argues that the invisibility of girls in mainstream Women Studies, Gender Studies, and boyhood studies was more significant in the sense that it did more damage and helped devalue girl culture (2016).

Mitchell does not confine her charting of Girlhood Studies to the North American continent but extends it to Africa and comments on the growth of Girlhood Studies through works by prominent African scholars. Claudia Mitchell (2016) acknowledges the presence of Girls/Girlhood Studies in Africa with a focus on Zimbabwe, presenting a novel that has come to be a landmark text and "feminist classic in postcolonial literature on presence and absence in relation to girls' lives and especially girls' education" (2016,

93). Mitchell acknowledges the works of Zimbabwean novelist and filmmaker TsiTsi Dangaremba, who in her novel *Nervous Conditions*, makes a defining statement about girls' education in Africa: African boys enjoy the privilege of being sent to school while African girls are kept at home to work. Dangaremba's novel, published in 1988 became a feminist classic that exposed the situation of the girl child's education in the Global South (Mitchell 2016).

Another important development in the charting of Girlhood Studies is seen in the First World Conference on Education for all that was held in Jomtien in 1990. This conference was the founding platform of the UN *Millennium Development Goals* that emphasized the need for promoting girls' education. Mitchell highlights the need for the world to see the experiences of girls in a global context especially as she had been involved in, and worked with projects that promoted the education of girls in Zambia (Mitchell 2016).

In order to chart the development of Girlhood Studies, it is important to understand the feminist dilemma, which is the complex relationship between girls, their mothers and other adult women: "adult women can be a problem in the lives of girls and young women" (Mitchel 2016, 95). There have been cases documented in which "adult women teachers and mothers in [girls'] lives betrayed them by encouraging girls to speak up and then not speaking up themselves" (95). Additionally, there have been other cases documented in which adult women have not paid attention to girls who have complained about being victimized or raped (Mitchell 2016). What this indicates is how the

invisibility of girls was perpetuated, thus their absence in feminist scholarship and youth research works until the 1990s.

The development of Girls Studies after the 1990s is picked up by Janie Victoria Ward and Beth Cooper Benjamin in their article “Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connection: A Critical Review of American Girls’ Studies” published in 2004. They look at research studies and scholarly works that were produced during this time, that focused on a “crisis” in the development of girls (2004). This crisis came about partly as a result of findings in 1992 by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) on *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, which was the first survey done in the United States of America on the link between schooling and girls’ psychosocial experiences (2004). The finding of this study led scholars and other professionals to engage in envisioning and creating better school environments that were favorable to girls’ educational success (Ward and Benjamin 2004).

The subsequent years saw the publication of various kinds of literature that investigated the issue of gender diversity in America and the reason boys were more privileged in learning institutions than girls. Teachers and administrators were observed to be showing preferences towards boys at the expense of girls’ education (Ward and Benjamin 2004). This situation echoes the recent happenings in Cameroon and other sub-Saharan African countries where male privilege still reigns.

While tracing the inequalities inherent in the treatment of boys and girls, and how this plays a role in the emergence of the field of Girls Studies, Ward and Benjamin also address the consequences of such actions in the lives of girls. They reference works that

describe adolescence as a trying period for girls. Such works portrayed girls as more vulnerable, thus could easily become depressed, develop eating disorders, attempt self-injury or suicide, all as a result of the unjust experiences at school (2004). Out of these devastating possible outcomes of the marginalization of girls, came the move from adult-centered research to a centering of the individual girl's experience in Girls Studies (Ward and Benjamin 2004).

The literature of the early 1990s called for personal reflections among adults who work with and care for girls, and equally for institutional and cultural changes intended to preserve younger girls' "voices" and strengths as they enter adolescence (2004, 18).

Thus, the field of Girls Studies has developed into a field that encourages the issue of girls' development both educationally and psychologically. Generally, the development of Girls Studies in the United States of America focused on disrupting trends of oppression that involved teacher-student interactions in the classroom (Ward and Benjamin 2004).

Researchers have also commented on the importance in recognizing the difference evident in girls' experiences but they also show concern that concentrating on differences between girls might minimize the significance of the commonalities among girls' experiences, which are "gendered cultural and political experiences that cross lines of race/ethnicity, class, and sexuality" (Ward and Benjamin 2004, 21). The intersecting of identities in a girl must therefore be taken into consideration when dealing with their experiences but it must also be taken into consideration that American girls suffer discrimination from

institutions such as schools and health care systems (2004). Therefore, following this train of thought, while exploring the status of Cameroonian girls in this research project, the intersecting identities of these girls coupled with their geographical location, and their sociocultural background must be taken into consideration.

Reflecting on the emergence of girls as a focus of concern, Mary Cobbett (2014) from the field of developmental studies, suggests that there has been a movement from focusing on girls to focusing on girls with regard to their futures roles as mothers. Since girls have been receiving international attention in recent times, Cobbett (2014) decides to explore the reasons behind this popularity attached to the girl by focusing on girls and education, and violence against girls including the problem of HIV infection among girls in sub-Saharan Africa (Cobbett 2014). Cobbett's article includes her personal experiences while working with girls in Africa and the attention that has been paid to adolescent girls and their sexual experiences. Her touch on girls' sexual relationships associated with experiences of violence and coercion (Cobbett 2014) echoes the types of abuse that girls experience in Cameroon that ultimately inhibits their access to primary education.

The fact that research on girls that has contributed to the establishment of Girls Studies as an academic field comes from both the Global North as well as the Global South (Cobbett 2014) shows how widespread interest in girls' issues has become in recent decades. Cobbett is particularly interested in the "avoidance of portraying girls either as passive victims or as especially 'good' or 'innocent'" and she highlights girls' experiences in recent research (Cobbett 2014, 311). Cameroon is in the Global South and despite the numerous girls' empowerment groups and organizations that are sprouting out

all over the country, Girls Studies as an academic field that can highlight the Cameroonian girl's unique experiences has not yet emerged. This could be realized with the help of African feminists on the ground.

### **Third World/African Feminisms**

Third World/African feminisms and Transnational feminism are the two branches of feminism that relate to the African woman. Both branches emerged in opposition to Western feminism with its belief that all women across the globe face the same kind of oppression due to their sex and gender. The commonality between Third World and Transnational feminisms is the rejection of this notion of universality of experiences of all women suggested by mainstream feminism (Herr 2014; Mohanty 1988). Claudia Mitchell (2016) and other Girlhood Studies scholars have established that Girlhood Studies exists in Africa, therefore, Third World feminisms has expanded its scope to incorporate the African girl child.

Some scholars have paid closer attention to the differences between Third World feminisms and Transnational feminism, and to what makes African feminisms a special brand. Herr (2014) makes a distinction between Third World feminisms and Transnational feminism by claiming that Third World feminisms aim “at generating descriptively reliable feminist analyses by Third World women themselves of Third World women’s diverse forms of oppression and different modes of resistance” in their countries. Herr affirms that Third World feminisms’ “focus has been on Third World women’s activism in their particular local/national contexts” (2).

Transnational feminism, on the other hand, is primarily interested in feminist organizations, reproductive rights, networks, and movements occurring outside and beyond individual nation-states at the transnational level (Herr 2014). Using Mohanty's findings as reference, Herr argues that the claim by Transnational feminism as being representative of Third World women's interests is preposterous because, there have been great misconceptions about Third World women's oppression as merely a severe case of gender oppression (Herr 2014). Consequently, Herr asserts that this theoretical basis of transnational feminist thought needs to be revamped.

Herr also proposes that Third World feminisms, with its attachment to the nation-state and nationalism, should be reclaimed by Transnational feminism so as to promote inclusive feminisms that are open to diversity and multiple feminist perspectives of Third World women on the ground (Herr 2014). Transnational feminism, therefore, refers to both a contemporary feminist paradigm and the corresponding activist movement. Both the theories and activist practices of Transnational feminism are concerned with how globalization and capitalism affect people across nations, races, genders, classes, and sexualities (Herr 2014). Transnational feminism is said to be a flexible category that encompasses plural feminist perspectives about how to overcome systemic oppression of Third World women at the transnational level (Herr 2014). Herr proposes that since these two branches of feminisms emerged in opposition to white western feminism's presumption of universal patriarchy, both need to work together, not separately (2014).

### *African Feminisms*

There is an on-going debate surrounding the term African feminism(s) that weighs the value of the singular against the plural form the term. Some critics have argued that the movement should be called “African feminisms” because of the number of feminisms that have sprung out of the African continent. While others argue that there is more behind the plurality of the term.

Oshadi Mangena in her essay “Feminism (singular), African feminisms (plural) and the African Diaspora” (2003), questions why it is normal when Western feminism is referred to in the singular form, but African feminisms must take the plural form (2003). She argues that the reason behind this is to ensure unequal treatment of all things African, as also seen for instance, in the addition of the prefix “ethno” to “African ways of knowing” such as ethno-science, ethno-philosophy, ethno-mathematics and so on (2003, 98). This suggests that Western science is the true science while African science is related to magic (99). Thus “only the west has the exclusive right to confer the credentials of science on feminism” (99). As a result, the pluralization of the term feminism when it comes Africa, only goes to buttress the underlying superiority of Western feminism, so Mangena (99). She concludes that “the term African feminisms is thus the best way to deny the African woman the capacity to ascend to the heights of ‘science’” (99), thereby making all things African inferior to all things Western.

Contrary to Mangena, Nigerian feminist scholar Obioma Nnaemeka argues that “it will be more accurate to argue not in the context of a monolith (African feminism) but rather in the context of a pluralism (African feminisms) that captures the fluidity and



dynamism of the different cultural imperatives, historical forces, and localized realities conditioning women's activism/movements in Africa" (Nnaemeka 1998, 5). This evaluation seems valid when we consider the variety of African feminisms that have been proposed by African feminist scholars which, among others include, Nego-feminism, African Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, Femalism, and Snail-Sense feminism. Two commonalities among these alternative terms include, first, their rejection of Western feminism, and second, their centering of the African woman's experiences on the African continent with the exception of Motherism, which is inclusive of black women and men from all over the world.

In order to reflect on these alternative names for the term African feminisms, feminist writer and scholar Naomi Nkaelah in her article "(West) African feminisms and their Challenges" (2016) introduces the different kinds of African feminisms that exist in West Africa. First, Nkaelah introduces the reader to Nego-feminism, a term proposed by Nigerian feminist scholar Obioma Nnaemeka to replace African feminisms and it describes a feminism of negotiation and "no ego," which is structured by cultural backgrounds (2004). Next, there is African Womanism, which is propagated by Nigerian scholar Ogunyemi Chikwenye Okonjo. This term addresses feminism from an African perspective and places the "feminist vision within the black women's confrontation with culture, colonialism, and many other forms of domination that condition African women's lives" (Nkaelah 2016, 65). Then, there is Stiwanism, a term coined by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, in her book *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (1994). Stiwanism is a combination of two words, the acronym "stiwa," which stands for

“Social Transformation Including Women in Africa” (Ayodo 1996, 143). She prefers the term Stiwanism to African feminisms because, Stiwanism places African women’s experiences at the center of analysis, contrary to the word feminism, which is mistrusted and rejected by most African men and women (Nkaelah 2016; Ayodo 1996) as it fails to take into consideration the African woman’s realities. Motherism is an alternative term for feminism proposed by feminist scholar Catherine Acholunu in her book *Motherism; The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995), which denotes motherhood, nature and nurture (Nkaelah 2016; Lewis 2001). Motherism celebrates gendered roles of women, affirms gendered roles for women, embraces human struggle, and reinforces gender stereotypes (Lewis 2001). To Acholonu, this is the form of feminism that African women should practice. Lastly, the term Femalism is an alternative term to feminism proposed by feminist scholar Chioma Opara. This kind of feminism according to Opara lays emphasis on the African woman’s body (Nkealah 2016), and it is basically opposed to Nego-feminism and the other types discussed above.

Nigerian feminist critic Obioma Nnaemeka in her article “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa’s Way” (2004) explains that African feminism must address the African environment, and it is a proactive kind of feminism, which is unique by itself (376). This uniqueness is what inspired Nnaemeka to coin the term Nego-feminism, which to her best describes what others term African feminism. Nego-feminism, she explains, is first of all a “feminism of negotiation”, and secondly stands for “no ego” feminism that has its foundation in cultures of shared values, of “principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance,” that foreground many African

cultures (Nnaemeka 2004, 377-378). She uses the term negotiation twofold. First, to mean “give and take,” or to “exchange” and second, to mean to successfully cope with, or to “go around” (2004).

The difference between African feminisms and Western feminism according to Nnaemeka, lies in the fact that feminism as practiced in Africa “challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts” (Nnaemeka 2004, 378). This just goes to explain that feminism in African context makes room for practices that might be seen as unconventional when one looks at it from a western perspective. Contrary to Western feminism whose language challenges, deconstructs, disrupts and blows apart, African feminisms use language that portrays compromise, negotiation and collaboration (380). As opposed to western women, African women are willing and ready to accommodate their male counterparts even in difficult circumstances and this depicts the pervasiveness of African women’s conduct (380). Nego-feminism, therefore, pays attention to the methods used by African women to compromise, include, and evade circumstances of conflict with their men in order to keep the peace. Nego-feminism describes the kind of feminism that is practiced in Cameroon.

Literary critic Sinmi Akin-Aino in her piece titled, “Beyond an Epistemology of Bread, Butter, Culture, and Power: Mapping the African Feminist Movement” (2011), agrees with Nnaemeka when she writes that “African feminisms are multi-faceted, multi-purpose, and reflect the diverse nature of feminist organizing, practice and scholarship”

in Africa (2011, 69). The fluidity in the movement is seen in the context of Africa and it is opposed to elements of Western feminism, which pays no attention to the African woman's experience. Therefore, African feminisms are in constant negotiation with traditions and customs that make up their everyday existence and reject European influence.

Akin-Aino also references feminist critic Oyeronke Oyewumi whose understanding of the social construction of gender resonates with the idea that all women across the globe are universally oppressed in the same way due to their gender. This view, Oyewumi argues, negates the differences inherent in women's experiences, their worldview and their social locations that are important in their praxis of feminism (Akin-Aino 2011). As a result, Akin-Aino is basically concerned with ideas of African feminisms as portrayed by Nnaemeka and Oyewumi, which attempt to challenge distortions that portray African women as a singular entity, or, which misinterprets the diversity of African women's experiences (71-72). Akin-Aino therefore challenges the Western notion that African feminisms are all about bread, butter and culture politics. She posits that there is more behind African feminisms wage struggles, battles, and other difficulties that occupy feminists on the continent of Africa (73). Thus, African feminisms are beyond the bread, butter, culture and power narrative.

Other critics have explored the concept of African feminism through their use of feminist methods that involve fieldwork and a recounting of their experiences while working with local women in Africa. Using the singular form of the word throughout her article, Joelle Cruz (2015) presents the most in depth of these studies. She explores a distinctive perspective on African feminism as she explains the concept using theories of

holism, collectivity and situationality. Cruz explains that West African feminism is based on praxis (2015), meaning there is a combination of feminist praxis and grassroots organizing that exists only in West Africa. Cruz cites the example of *susu* or rotating credit associations, which are groups formed by women in order to empower each other in their communities (Cruz 2015). These *susu* groups are a form of African women organizing that replaces, as well as functions as a bank. Small groups of about ten to twenty women join *susu* groups, choose a *susu* mother who coordinates, collects and disburses the money collected to the members of the group.

These grassroots organizations include members who contribute a given monetary sum to the group. The money is then pooled together, and the lump sum is redistributed to one member at a time. Once all group members have received their money, the cycle starts anew ... rotating credit associations are often the only way for marginalized individuals, who cannot access official banking, to procure significant sums of money (Cruz 2015, 25).

The impact of *susu* grassroots organizing groups is extremely relevant especially in communities where women must cater for the basic needs and insure the survival of their families through small businesses and merchandizing. *Susu* collection can be used to invest in businesses that would not be possible to maintain otherwise. These collections are also used for maintaining the family, and for buying clothes and school material for the children (Cruz 2015).

The concept of *susu* or rotating credit associations is a West African tradition of grassroots organizing that is named differently in each country; in Cameroon it is called

*njangi* and these organizing and empowering methods are so deeply rooted in the communities, that Cameroonians in living the West still form *njangi* groups.

Cruz in her article points to the significance of African feminism using the most basic examples. With regards to work and motherhood, African women find it normal to take their children to work because, African women have always worked (Cruz 2015). Thus, work and motherhood are two ways that African women feel empowered. As a mother, the woman's status in society rises, and as a hardworking and industrious woman, her status equally rises. These attributes afford women opportunities to be respected and valued in their communities.

African feminism is therefore a practical feminism that need not be oppositional to men (Cruz 2015). Women's organizing functions not only to empower women, but also to form smaller communities that throw light on their abilities to overcome their differences and work together for the benefit of their communities. Thus, African feminism teaches the value of putting away personal interests for the good of the community (Cruz 2015).

Other tenets of African feminism that Cruz explores are those of negotiations and compromise (2015). Since it is bound by interdependent relationships, African feminism know how to avoid patriarchal roadblocks in order to avoid conflict in the community. It avoids rigid gender binaries that are foregrounded in Western feminism, by centering on the shifting nature of meaning (Cruz 2015). As a result, what would be understood under the term "girl child" in Western feminism would have other meanings in African

feminism. African girl children are brought up under different understanding of gender roles and expectations than their Western counterparts.

The use of orality is another aspect of African feminism that Cruz expounds on. Being mostly an oral culture, the senses of smell, taste, touch, and hearing are of great importance in African culture (Cruz 2015). Through listening to oral tales, lessons are taught about the value of hard work, the negative effects of idleness, and the importance of drawing a moral from stories and applying them to life in the communities. Thus, watching and listening patiently to the older generation is a crucial part of growing up as an African child (Cruz 2015). However, this “listening” and “obeying” culture (“children are to be seen not heard”) makes it easy for African girls to be victimized contrary Cruz’ positive view of the practice.

Stereotypes that portray Third World women as dependent and as victims of abuse by Third World men in every aspect of their lives are debunked by this reality of hard work and community empowerment that Cruz describes. There has been a distortion and misunderstanding of African women’s struggles that has been established through the lens of Western feminism (Cruz 2015). African women from Liberia, Nigeria, Cameroon and other West African countries have found ways through women’s groups to avoid patriarchal constraints. How systems of abuse and victimization of girls are still sustained, and how grassroots feminists are combatting injustice, will be the subject of the upcoming chapters of this research.

## Chapter Four: Results

This research study examines the abuse of primary school girls in and out of primary schools in parts of Cameroon, and also examines whether abuse inhibits girls' access to basic education. As I embarked on this project, I was able to interview four staff members of two grassroots NGOs that advocate for the girl child in Cameroon. Each participant that I interviewed presented their experiences working with girls and what they believe to be the reasons why primary schools have become unsafe spaces for girls in Cameroon. My participants explained that there has been a shift in the victimization of girl children in parts of Cameroon due to current political unrest in the areas they work. This shift can be seen in the rise of sexual assaults that is one of the direct outcomes in areas of conflict.

### ***The Internally Displaced People (IDP) of the Southwest and Northwest Regions***

The phenomenon known as “The Anglophone Crisis” in Cameroon addresses a conflict situation that has its roots in the marginalization of a minority group of people in Cameroon called the Anglophones or Southern Cameroonians. History teaches us that Cameroon was colonized by the British and the French after WWII, but the division of the geographical space known as Cameroon was unequal because France got the greater share, which covered eight provinces, also known as the francophone zone, and Britain got two provinces Southwest Region and Northwest Region, which formed Southern Cameroons, also known as the anglophone zone (Cammish and Brock 1994, 235). What naturally ensued was that the French region became the dominant entity even though the Cameroon constitution allowed for two autonomous regions (Adichie 2018). Anglophone



Cameroonians making up twenty percent of the population soon became aware of their marginalized status, especially as French was mandatory for all anglophones, while francophones disregarded the English language (Adichie 2018). The consequences of this marginalization were felt in public institutions such as education, law, public services and other institutions that catered for the everyday official services of Anglophone Cameroonians. The French language dominated all public spheres to the extent that it spread into anglophone schools and the judiciary.

Consequently, in 2016, things came to a head as the marginalized Anglophones began fighting against French domination in their schools and public sphere. Teachers went on strike to protest the increase of French-speaking teachers in English schools (Adichie 2018). Soon after, they were joined by lawyers who protested the infiltration of French judges, lawyers and other members of the French judiciary into anglophone courts, judging cases in French even though many clients, especially the elderly and uneducated, could not understand the proceedings. Lawyers also protested against the kind of law that French judges practiced in the Anglophone courts - the French practiced French law while the English practiced Common law based on the British system. This became a point of contention when French law was increasingly used in anglophone courts. Not long after, civilians joined the protests because they wanted autonomy and believed their cause was just. Civilians demanded to have teachers who taught their children in the language of the region (English) and judges, who practiced Common law and who spoke the English language (Adichie 2018).

The response from the Cameroon government was brutal in nature. Military troops were sent into the Southwest and Northwest Regions to curb the protests. Fighting ensued between the military and the civilians and many lives were lost, private homes and property burnt down. The situation became worse because “most anglophones only wanted autonomy, but against the glare of state violence, the movement for independence ... suddenly seemed legitimate” (Adichie 2018). There has been continuous carnage brought by conflict between pro-independence groups whose leaders have fled the country, inciting their followers to continue fighting for the independence of Southern Cameroons, and the state troops. As a result, Cameroon’s larger cities and towns are plagued with people they term “Internally Displaced People” (IDP). These IDPs are people who have fled their villages and homes due to the brutality of the conflict between the government troops and the pro-independence fighters. Some IDPs have lost their homes, or their families and their livelihood from the burnings, shootings and pillaging by fighters from both sides.

The IDPs are also those who have not been able to flee the country to reside in neighboring countries like Nigeria. IDPs flee to the bigger cities in the Southern Regions where violence resulting from the conflict is curbed by military presence, and to the Francophone cities of Yaounde and Douala, which are not affected by the Anglophone Crisis because they are cities found in the francophone zone. The IDPs include people from zero years through the eighties or older, and are either orphaned, homeless or seeking out kin in parts of the country that is free from strife. According to the United Nations Refugee Fund (UNHCR), as of October 2018, there were 437 thousand IDPs in Cameroon and

60 percent are women and 43 percent are children, 82 percent of refugee households live in settlements and 86 percent in host communities are food insecure (UNHCR CM 2019).

It is important to note at this point that even though the IDPs in the Southern Cameroons and in the francophone zones, include people of all ages, the IDPs that my grassroots advocates work with are basically between the ages of zero to twenty years old.

### **Grassroots Advocates for the Girl Child**

In accordance with feminist research methods and with regulations concerning the involvement of person-to-person interviews in a research study, I have given my interviewees pseudonyms, which serve the purpose of securing the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants. Thus, Participant One will henceforth be called Ginger, Participant Two, Joy, Participant Three, Lisa, and Participant Four, Jasmine.

At the beginning of the interviews, all participants explained that the focus of their advocacy has shifted from their target communities due to the Anglophone Crisis. The communities that they targeted when their NGOs were founded are mostly no longer accessible, have been burnt to the ground, or are infiltrated by separatist fighters and/or patrolled by the military. Therefore, these NGOs have redirected their advocacy efforts to accessible communities and to the IDPs.

Ginger and Joy work with the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) based in Buea, Southwest Region. CHRDA is an NGO, which was basically founded as a human rights organization in 2015 to document human rights violations, and to cater for the rights of everyone. Today, CHRDA provides various services to the

communities around Southwest and Northwest Regions such as capacity building, advocacy, women's empowerment, humanitarian and legal services for women's rights.

Among other duties, CHRDA staff carry out workshops aimed at sensitizing women and girls on their rights and as of 2016, CHRDA advocacy programs teach women how to resolve conflict as a result of the Anglophone Crisis. CHRDA works with girls and women of all ages.

Lisa and Jasmine work with Welisane Foundation, which is an NGO that has offices in Buea, Southwest Region and in the capital city of Yaoundé in the Central Region. This NGO has been engaged in girls' empowerment since 2010 but they only got their NGO status with formal registration in 2018. The four priority activism areas for Welisane Foundation include education, socioeconomic empowerment for women and girls, networking, mentoring and partnership, and sexual and reproductive rights for women and girls. They work with girls and women from zero through seventy, but with the Anglophone Crisis, the girls they engage with are between zero and twenty-years-old.

Ginger is the Assistant Director of CHRDA and holds a PhD in Gender and Women Studies from the University of Buea. This participant has been active in the field of female empowerment since 2013. As a gender officer, she travels to communities with a team to educate women and girls on their rights, bring humanitarian aid to the needy and she implements projects that address social challenges.

Joy is the acting gender officer at CHRDA, and she succeeded Ginger in this position in September 2019. She also has a background in Gender and Women Studies from the University of Buea and has been a gender activist since March 2019. Her duties

include organizing workshops, visiting communities and schools to sensitize girls on issues of sexual abuse, reproduction rights, and human rights violation. Among other things, Joy educates girls and women on issues concerning them. This participant has valuable field experience that is valuable to this research study.

Lisa is the founder of Welisane Foundation and she has been an activist in girls' empowerment from a very young age. She inherited her talent for activism from her mother who was a women's leader in her community and catered for the well-being of girls and women. Lisa has a background in journalism and mass communication, international communication, diplomacy, and international relations. She is presently a PhD candidate in the field of international law. Her duties include travelling all over Cameroon to oversee the work of the various branches of Welisane Foundation, organizing workshops and activities that are simultaneously carried out all over Cameroon, and recruiting volunteers and sponsors for the Foundation. She runs the office in Yaoundé and is involved in field work on the ground.

Jasmine is the communication officer at Welisane Foundation based in Yaoundé. Her background is in girl child empowerment and she has been involved in the field of advocacy for many years. Jasmine is passionate about girl child issues and is very active in making a change. Her duties involve locating homeless and destitute IDPs in the city of Yaoundé, catering for school needs so they can attend primary school and providing hygiene articles for the girls who need them so they can attend school with no hindrances. Organizing food items, health items, clothing for the IDPs and other girls in their target communities, Jasmine's practical and hand-on experiences validate this project.

In order to evaluate and compare the results of this research study derived from the interviews with the grassroots advocates in Cameroon, a short review of the Malawian situation concerning girl child abuse as it affects girls' participation in primary education, is pertinent.

### **Types of Abuse Experienced by Primary School Girls in Malawi**

The researchers Bisika, Ntata and Konyani (2009) carried out a study using questionnaires distributed to girls in 1496 households across Malawi in order to “explore the nature and extent of violence against girls” (289). The result of this study shows that the forms of violence that Malawian girls experienced on a daily basis included, “beatings, punitive labor, food withholding, sexual assault and rape, forced marriage, parental neglect, verbal abuse, social ostracization and denial of access to education (Bisika, Ntata and Konyani 2009, 290). At school, Malawian girls documented that they experience “corporal punishments, beatings by both boys and teachers, verbal abuse by both boys and teachers, sexual assault and rape by both boys and teachers, inappropriate touching and discriminatory classroom practices” (290). Even though girls made reports to the school authorities, community leaders and even police officers about these violation of their rights, abuse of girls persisted. This study concluded that violence against girls is a widespread phenomenon in Malawi and it inhibits girls' access to primary education (291).

### **Types of Abuse Experienced by Primary School Girls in Cameroon**

All four participants in this research study exposed a typology of abuse of primary school girls that is on the one hand a common phenomenon all over the country, and on the other

hand, typical for certain regions of Cameroon. They all emphasize that violence against girls and women has been on the rise over the past few years, but with the Anglophone Crisis, violence against girls has dramatically increased. Types of abuse faced by primary school girls that may directly affect their participation in education include, rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. Other circumstances that lead to abuse of girls and that might also affect girls' enrollment include, early or forced marriages, coercion and bullying, religious beliefs, poverty, child labor, illiteracy and cultural beliefs.

### *Some Statistics*

Participants from both NGOs that I interviewed could only make estimates because as Ginger, Joy, and Lisa stated, their organizations are young, and have not yet carried out any studies on the issues pertaining to my research. Nevertheless, they could report with certainty on the communities and groups they work with.

For every group of 20 IDP girls they work with, Ginger documents that approximately 15 have had little or no formal education, all 20 are from poverty-stricken background, and 18 have experienced some form of sexual assault. For every 20 girls from their target communities, Joy documents that all 20 are from poor homes, about 15 may have started some formal education, less than 5 may have experienced sexual assault, about 10 are attending school.

### ***Rape and Violence against Girls as Tactics of Militarization***

The rape of girls as documented by these girl child advocates is a contributing factor to girls' under-enrollment in primary education, but its intensity depends on the region of the country where these girls reside.

In the Southwest Region, Ginger and Joy record a very low rate of rape of girl children. In the years before 2016, rape of schoolgirls was practically non-existent and was not a defining factor that kept girls away from school. There were random cases of rape that were reported but these usually occurred within the family and perpetrated by male relatives or other males associated with the household such as family drivers, yardmen, or neighbors. This is not an exclusive list, and does not imply that all family drivers, yardmen and male neighbors raped girls. It is just to point out that perpetrators were male who were somehow connected to the family. These rare cases of rape were dealt with within the family because it was believed to be a topic that shamed the family. Some of these cases were reported to the authorities and the perpetrators faced jail time. Nowadays, Ginger and Joy report of cases of rape that are mostly intimidation tactics from the separatists and the military.

Feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe has written a plethora of essays on the militarization of women's and girls' lives during war time. She defines militarization as a process by which citizens become dependent on the military: "militarization is a step-by-step process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas" (2000, 3). Thus, Enloe emphasizes that during war and militarization, it is necessary to use our feminist curiosity to



examine how gender is constructed in order to understand who benefits from the politics of militarization.

The case of women and girls' militarization in Southern Cameroons follows Enloe's evaluation of the rape of girls in other war-torn countries such as Rwanda in 1994 and Japan during the Battle of Okinawa in 1995, for example. In her book *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (2000), Enloe makes connections between soldiers, women, politics, and rape victims so as to make clear how gender roles are formed and sustained to serve the needs of the military. Enloe describes rape as tactic of war. The scope of rape of girls and women during the Rwandan conflict in 1994 was described as unimaginable (2000, 132), and the kidnapping and rape of a twelve year-old schoolgirl in Okinawa by two American marines shocked Okinawan girls into a new consciousness that was dominated by fear of the military (Enloe 2000, 113-114). This fear of the military and the separatist forces has dominated women and girls' lives in the past three years in Southwest and Northwest Regions of Cameroon. However, the way women's and girls' lives are militarized in Cameroon, varies depending on whether these women live in an occupied village, town, or city. How women and girls are used to serve the needs of the fighting parties is currently manifested in the Southwest and Northwest Regions of Cameroon.

Some months after the beginning of the Anglophone Crisis, the Separatists instituted the concept of Ghost Towns in the Southwest and Northwest Regions of Cameroon. This is an intimidation tactic in which every Monday, no movement is allowed in all the cities, towns and villages of these two Regions. Additionally, in the first three years of

the conflict, all schools from nursery through universities were shut down. Freedom fighters were and are still brutal in their meting out of punishment to those who break these rules for the simple reason that, as Enloe in her *The Curious Feminist* (2004) puts it, “rape causes public outrage and political embarrassment” (119) and this reduces girls and women to the level of commodities as they are considered spoils of war. As a result, girls who attempt to go to school are molested, assaulted and raped by both separatist fighters and the military as a lesson for others. The result, according to Joy, is that more than 50 percent of girls in the Southwest Region, and more than 80 percent in the Northwest Region have dropped out of school. Rape in Southern Cameroons has therefore become a tactic of militarization on the one hand, and an instrument of national security on the other hand, that is used to keep girls away from schools, and to secure peace in the region.

Literary critics Watts and Zimmerman are of the opinion that “in some cases, perpetrators consciously use violence [and rape] as a mechanism for subordination” (2002, 1232). Through subordination of girls, the conflict in Southern Cameroons gains more strength. Girls pay the price with their bodies, and the effects of this abuse will be long lasting. As one reviewer of Enloe’s *Nimo’s War*, *Emma’s War* correctly surmises, “Even decades later and through succeeding generations, women carry the marks of war on their bodies and in their subject position” (Brooks 2012, 298). Step-by-step, women and girls’ lives are being controlled by the military forces and by the pro-independence fighters in the Southern Cameroons.

Experiences of rape in the Central Region of Cameroon as recounted by Lisa and Jasmine are different from those that occur in the Southwest and Northwest Regions where there is political unrest. With the influx of IDPs into francophone cities such as Yaoundé and Douala, there has been an increase in cases of rape that are reported. A considerable number of these IDPs are homeless, live in abandoned or unfinished buildings, are exposed to violence and are unprotected. Though Welisane Foundation helps IDP girls who are willing to attend school with their school supplies and encourage them to go school, the unprotected housing situation these girls live in, with no parents or adults to watch out for them, expose them to rape and sexual assault on a daily basis. In these communities around Yaoundé, girls are raped in and out of school premises, by teachers, by peers, and by perpetrators who intercept girls on their way to school or in the neighborhood. As a result, only about 30 percent of girls in the communities Ginger works with, attend school. Jasmine recounts cases of violence against girls that are so brutal in nature that girls experience trauma and avoid leaving their homes. Parents are becoming more alarmed as the cases of raped girls in their communities are reported in the media. Primary schools around Yaoundé have taken the precaution of letting younger pupils out of school premises only in the presence of a parent.

### ***Sexual Harassment***

In her essay “Masculinities, Policing, Women and International Politics of Sexual Harassment” (2013), Cynthia Enloe comments on cases of sexual harassment by surmising that “if women do not feel secure on the streets, in their homes, in their workplaces, in their schools and inside government buildings, they will not be able to exercise full

citizenship” (79). The case of girls being harassed by teachers and their male peers in primary schools in the francophone regions covered in this study, is a sure way of preventing girls from attaining agency and basic education.

At schools, through sexual harassment, male students and teachers maintain their dominant position in society by making the girls feel small, intimidated, and afraid. Sexual harassment according to Cynthia Enloe “is a feminist concept that has shone a brighter light on the ways that patriarchy operates” (2013, 80-81). Girls either attend school with trepidation, always fearful of an attack, or they withdraw from schools. Through this intimidation tactic, males succeed in subduing girls and alienating girls from school premises. Patriarchy is ultimately maintained.

Ginger reports that 70 percent of IDP girls in the empowerment center at CHRDA become pregnant at some point, as a result of sexual assault by the military and the separatist forces. Ginger and others work with these girls by offering them productive activities to keep them busy. The empowerment center is designed to engage girls in practical skills and to keep them off the streets where they are constantly harassed.

### ***Rape and Sexual Assault within Families***

Lisa agrees with the other three participants that sexual abuse is on the rise in Cameroon. Their organization has yet to carry out a study on the rates of sexual abuse against girls, but it is well known that within families, sexual abuse has been a major problem for a very long time. Incest within families, teenage pregnancies stemming from abuse by male family members are issues that have plagued our communities. Girls are cautioned to keep quiet about sexual assault in the family because it brings shame to the family. Lisa

is working with girls and educating them on the fact that sexual assault and rape are crimes that are punishable by law. Lisa is encouraged by the fact that some families are opening up and reporting the rape of their girl children.

Ginger's NGO is also engaged in the sensitization of girls on rape and sexual assault within the family. They teach on the devastation that occurs in a girl's life when she is sexually assaulted or raped by family members. Some of these rapes occur continuously for many years without the parents' knowledge because the girls are afraid to speak out. Many girls get pregnant, some get infected with sexually transmitted infections and other diseases such as obstetric fistula. All of this helps to obstruct their education because pregnant or sick girls stop attending school. There are cases where girls have been molested by their aunt's, sister's, cousin's, or other relation's husband or other male closely associated with the family, and they are afraid of speaking up because they might be thrown out of the house by their relation. The trend among many Cameroonian wives is first of all to protect their marriage by avoiding acknowledging their husbands' misconduct. Some would prefer to return the girl child to her parents or other relations' household in the rural area they originated from, than to face the situation. Today, Ginger is encouraged because more mothers and female guardians are enlightened. They notice changes in the girl children's behaviors, and they are speaking up and demanding justice.

Ginger explains that even though CHRDA does a lot in capacity building for women and girls, violence rates are still on the rise in Southern Cameroons. She elaborates that "no matter how much time we spend sensitizing girls and women, they still return home to men and fathers whose mentality has not changed. Now we are directing our

efforts towards engaging men as partners in our fight to end violence against girls and women.” Consequently, she sees a growing need in educating boys and men on the ills of violence against girls and women.

### **Other Situations that Lead to the Victimization of Girls**

There are many indirect situations, traditions, and ways of life that perpetuate abuse of girls in my country. Situations that are beyond the girl child’s control that inhibit their access to basic education abound. Some are grave in nature and others are caused by lack of education of the parents, geographical settings, religious beliefs, patriarchy, and all these are combined with extreme poverty.

#### ***Early/Forced Marriages***

Early and/or forced marriage involve the marrying off of girls under the age of fifteen and below the age of consent. In Cameroon girls are legally of marriageable age when they turn sixteen (ageofconsent.net 2020). The age of consent has been an issue of concern in many African and other Third World countries. One such example is India where the state has been involved in regulating the age of consent for marriage for girls as far back as the late eighteenth century. Feminist scholar Ashwini Tambe (2009) documents that the age of majority for girls in India was set at eighteen in 1875 but this conflicted with the age of consent for marriage for girls, which was set at ten. This age was extended to twelve in 1891 and to fourteen in 1929 (394). Tambe traces this development in order to critique the persisting practices of early/child marriages in patriarchal societies,

which are apparently protective measures by the state that undermine girls' sexual agency (Tambe 2009, 393) and signals a greater exposure of girls to childbearing (394).

All four participants acknowledge that early marriage is a harmful practice that not only keeps girls out of primary schools, rob them of their agency, but may lead to health problems for the girls. Tambe's critique of the Indian law that restricts child marriages ties in with that of Cameroon. Even though the age of consent for marriage for girls is set at sixteen in Cameroon, critics have documented that in some parts of the country, these laws are disregarded because girls are still married off as soon as they attain puberty (Ekundayo 2019). By examining the paradox that positioned Indian girls below the ages of fourteen as children, and at the same time as mature regarding the age of consent for marriage, Tambe draws attention to other factors that influence these laws (Tambe 2009, 394). These factors have to do with patriarchy, economic interests, religion, socioeconomic status of families, and more. These factors are similar to those of Cameroon.

According to my participants and some critics, economic factors such as extreme poverty and lack of opportunities are some of the reasons why girls are married off as children in many African countries. Coupled with the tradition of bride price associated with marriage, and paid in goods such as livestock and cash are a motivation for families to increase their wealth (Ekundayo 2019), these girls are used to satisfy the desires of the males in their society. Ginger explains that the sensitization workshops that they carry out with girls and women teaches on some of these harmful practices. Husbands who pay bride price, Ginger explains, believe they are buying their wives and thus these girls

become their husbands' properties. The outcomes of these unions abound. Some of the most severe consequences of child marriages include the exposure of child brides to interpersonal violence and health problems such as obstetric fistula. Some girl children have lost their lives due to violence in their marital home. Others are subject to marital rape and inhumane treatment from their husbands because they are considered their husbands' properties. Ginger and Joy are committed to ending child marriages by educating men on the ills of marrying children or marrying off their children for financial gain. Their aim is to make men understand that there is a benefit in working hand in hand with women by treating women and their daughters with dignity.

Lisa and Jasmine have similar reactions and experiences with girls forced into early marriages. They believe it is the root cause of girls dropping out of primary schools in most communities, especially in the Northwest Region, and among individuals from this region living in Yaoundé. Lisa explains that early marriage is one of those traditions that they are fighting to eradicate through educational programs that include men. The reasons Lisa believes that early marriages are so dangerous is because of the consequences and outcomes. Early marriage leads to early pregnancy. A pregnant teenager is forced to stay at home and eventually drops out of school. Even in cases where girls get impregnated by teenage boys, the girls are still at a disadvantage. The pregnant girls drop out of school, but the boys responsible for their pregnancies continue their schooling. Early pregnancies can expose girls to diseases, and other health challenges such as HIV/AIDS and other STDs. Some girl children may seek illegal abortions that could be dangerous and have life changing consequences. Lisa found that among Cameroonian



women who experience infertility, one of the major causes is due to illegal termination of pregnancies in their youth. Many girls have lost their lives in the process of terminating unwanted early pregnancies without the help of trained medical professionals. Girls take this risky option in order to avoid the abuse meted on unwed teenage mothers by the community and other obstacles they may encounter. These obstacles range from constant verbal abuse from the community, financial burden of raising a child, fear of being dismissed from school, fear of losing respectability finding a spouse later in life, family shame and poverty.

Ginger and Joy explain their strategy of working with community leaders and other influential members of their target communities. Through these leaders, they get to the people and educate them on the ills of early/forced marriages on the health and education of girl children. Ginger and Joy partner with certain personalities that have acquired role model status through their personal lifestyles or elevated beliefs. For example, Joy describes a village chief in the Northwest Region who unlike other village chiefs in this region, lives in a monogamous marriage. Normally, chiefs in the Northwest Region have several wives. It is generally accepted by these communities that chiefs marry more wives in the years that they reign. It is not uncommon to see fathers who offer their daughters in marriage to chiefs so as to further their social and financial status. This has to do with the fact that chiefs own and control land surrounding their communities, and this is part of the wealth that they inherit when they are chosen to lead their communities. They are treated as royalty, and their children are referred to as princes and princesses. Being married to a chief in these communities is a privilege. Thus, to find a chief in a

monogamous marriage in the Northwest Region is a novelty. Such leaders are useful to Joy because they are powerful, feared, revered, and are obeyed by their subjects. Through such a leader, the other men in the society are taught several lessons. First, they see an enlightened leader who disregards polygamy. Second, they pay attention when such a leader propagates the education of girl children. Third, they begin to emulate their leaders and pay attention, when he encourages them to refrain or delay marrying off their under-aged daughters. Men who act as role models have helped curb the resistance of other males in the community towards women and girls' advocates. Ginger and Joy are hopeful with the work they are doing to end early marriages.

### ***Coercion and Bullying***

Coercion and bullying are two forms of intimidation that all four participants agree are common practices in all the regions they work in. In the Southwest Region, Joy testifies that bullying does not necessarily cause girls to drop out of schools but might lead to their reluctance in attending school, and even to them failing their classes and consequently re-taking certain classes. This process slows down the pace in the education of the girl child thus, they stay longer in school. This could also be one of the reasons that supports the fact that some girls aged fifteen are still attending primary schools in Cameroon. Joy believes that in such cases, it is the upbringing of the girl child from home that is lacking. This is because as Joy explains, bullying is common and a child who gained self-esteem and confidence from home would know how to deal with bullying peers. She would not have to drop-out of school but would find ways of taking care of the situation. In Yaoundé, Lisa experiences similar situations with bullying. Girls may avoid school due to

fear when they are being bullied by male peers. This may lead to failure and retaking of classes that delay girls from attaining their education and agency.

Coercion on the other hand is a factor that lead to girls dropping out of schools. Teachers use bribery, threat and promises to make girls accept their sexual advances. Jasmine laments on the fact that girls are so easily coerced into doing things against their will. This kind of agreement is not consent. Such girls are sexually abused, and I must point out that coercion is just as abusive as rape. Coercion has led to many teenage pregnancies, and consequently to many girls dropping out of school. Interestingly, Joy explains that coercion in the Southwest and Northwest Regions is more common in secondary and post-secondary levels. When it happens in primary level, it is devastating for the girls because it is outright rape. Jasmine has examined the same tendency in Yaoundé school communities.

### ***Distance to Schools and Religious Beliefs***

Two of my participants commented on some very troubling data by the UN on girls' literacy in Cameroon. I find this data troubling because it does not speak to my knowledge of my country. I am a Cameroonian who was born and educated in Cameroon. My reality of the status of girls' education in Cameroon does not conform with that of the UN. When the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2016) reports that 70 percent of Cameroonian girls are illiterate, I find this hard to accept because while living in Cameroon the first twenty four years of my life, there were situations where girls could not afford to attend primary school, but the majority of student population in primary and secondary schools were female. The situation only altered when we got to higher education. There we had almost

an equal number of both sexes in some institutions, and higher numbers of boys in other professional institutions. Nevertheless, all four grassroots advocates agree that there is some truth in this assertion by UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2016.

Joy explains that the UNESCO figure of 70 percent encompasses the whole country. The dis-harmony of this figure with my reality lies in the fact that there are regions in Cameroon that are extremely under-developed. Under-development comes with many setbacks including setbacks in education, and this elevates the overall figure for illiteracy. To Joy, the illiteracy rates of girls in the Regions of Northern and Eastern Cameroon is as high as 90 percent. This is because, just as some scholars have written, the geographical positions of the regions, extreme poverty, illiteracy of family members and parents, cultural and religious influences inherent in certain parts of the country, greatly discourage girls' participation in education (Malang 2017; Bysiewicz 2018). Critics who have quoted this UNESCO UIS 2016 statistics have supported their agreement with the aforementioned facts on the status of the Northern and Eastern Regions of Cameroon (Malang 2017), which are just two regions out of ten that make up the Republic of Cameroon. This, in my opinion, is an insufficient representation of the condition of girls' literacy of the whole of Cameroon. Nevertheless, I must concede that the UN's data gathering was more thorough than my own personal experience of Cameroon. This is because my experience is limited to the Southwest Region, the Northwest Region, and the Central (mostly Yaoundé) and Littoral (mostly Douala) Regions of Cameroon. These are the regions in which I grew up, studied in, and generally lived in.

The geographical factor is an important aspect that affects girls' access to education in the Northern and Eastern Regions of Cameroon, which are still very under-developed (Cammish and Brock 1994). The distance to school is a great hindrance for girls because children must walk long distances to school and long distances to return home every day. All four participants agree that illiteracy in these regions is very high and could be as high as 90 percent, according to Joy. Lisa asserts that the UNESCO figure of 70 percent illiteracy rate for girls is true for the rural areas and in the Northern, Eastern, and Adamawa Regions which are very under-developed, extremely poor, or constrained by rigid religious practices. On the other hand, in the Southwest Region, the Northwest Region and in the urban areas all over the country, more than 80 percent of girls are literate.

Joy and Lisa are in accord with Cammish and Brock and assess that there is a great discrepancy in the illiteracy rate between the rural and the urban areas; "in towns, 75% of men can read, in villages, 75% of women are illiterate" (1994, 235). Joy and Lisa have noticed that girls from rural areas (70 to 80 percent) are less likely to have had any beginners type of education than girls in the urban areas. Problems that become imminent then involve finding the right level in which to integrate rural girls into the educational system. Grassroot advocates find other solutions for girls that would help them gain some kind of sustaining trade.

Religious beliefs come into play when we look at the Far North Region of Cameroon where The Islam Religion is practiced. In this region, the common traditional belief is that girls do not need to have an education. Most of the time, when girls have acquired

the ability to read and write, they are pulled out of school because their one sole purpose is to become a wife (Malang 2017). People in the Northern Region of Cameroon believe that educating the girl child is equivalent to teaching her how to become a disobedient wife. All four participants lament the status of the girl child in the north, who remain oppressed by their Muslim traditions, which inhibit girls' access to education.

### ***Beatings***

Before 1998, corporal punishment was used as a means of correction in Cameroonian primary schools. This system of beating children was over-used and it became clear that children were being physically abused for crimes that were not worth the punishment they received. The brutality of teachers left its mark on children and influenced the increased school dropout rates for girls. Many parents preferred to keep their girl children at home than to expose them to schools where they were maltreated by teachers who were protected by school laws. Girls were afraid of going to school for fear of being severely beaten up by male teachers who may also have used this method to express personal frustration with a particular girl or circumstance. Fortunately, this method of correction became outlawed by 1998.

According to the Cameroon National Educational Guidelines No. 98/004 1998, corporal punishment is unlawful. This decree as found in Corporal Punishment of Children in Cameroon by Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children 2018 (CPOC), states that "the physical and moral integrity of the student is guaranteed in the educational system. Therefore, corporal punishment and all other forms of violence, discrimination of any kind ... are prohibited" (CPOC Cameroon 2018) All participants in

this study report that beatings of schoolgirls by boys or teachers is no longer a norm. Instead, there are cases reported of intimidation and threats in and around school premises. Beatings, however, is not one of the reasons why girls avoid or drop out of schools today.

### ***Poverty and Child Labor***

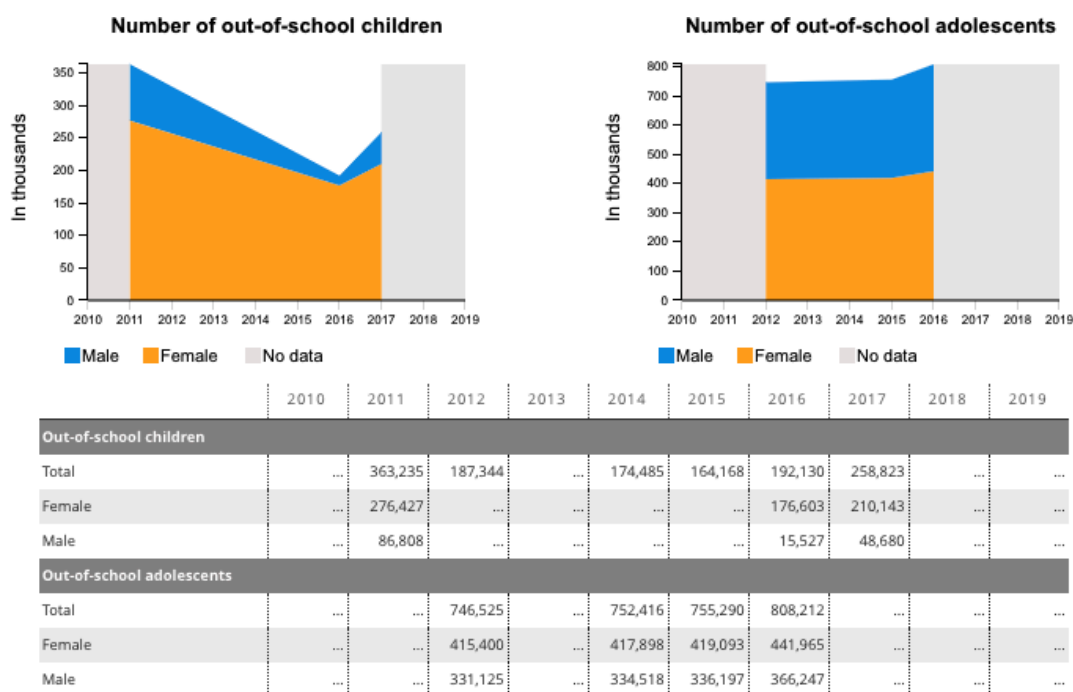
Extreme poverty is a major cause of unfavorable primary school enrollment for girls. Joy maintains that most of the girls they work with come from rural areas and their parents cannot afford even the minimal school fees required in government-controlled schools, not to mention school supplies. Most poverty-stricken families are concerned with ways that guarantee their survival, and not with the education of their children. Joy explains that since her NGO has not yet carried out a specific research on this issue, she can only give estimates. Most of the girls they work with, however, are from the rural areas, they have come to towns to live with relatives who may be poor themselves, as a result, these girls are taken advantage of. Some relatives send them out to hawk their wares instead of sending them to school. Therefore, poverty can lead to child labor in the Southwest and the Northwest Regions, or it can force some parents to marry their daughters off at a very tender age. This is another reason why girls may drop out or not go to school at all.

### ***Involvement of the UN and Third World/African Feminism in Cameroon***

A visual on the status of girl children's accessibility to primary school education from 2010 to 2018 has been presented by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. These graphs show the disparity between girls' and boys' participation in education. Figure 4.1 shows

the number of children and adolescents in thousands who are out of school in the entire country.

**Figure 4.1 Cameroon: Number of Out-of-School children and adolescents 2010 - 2018**



Source: Cameroon. UNESCO UIS Accessed February 2020

<http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/cm>

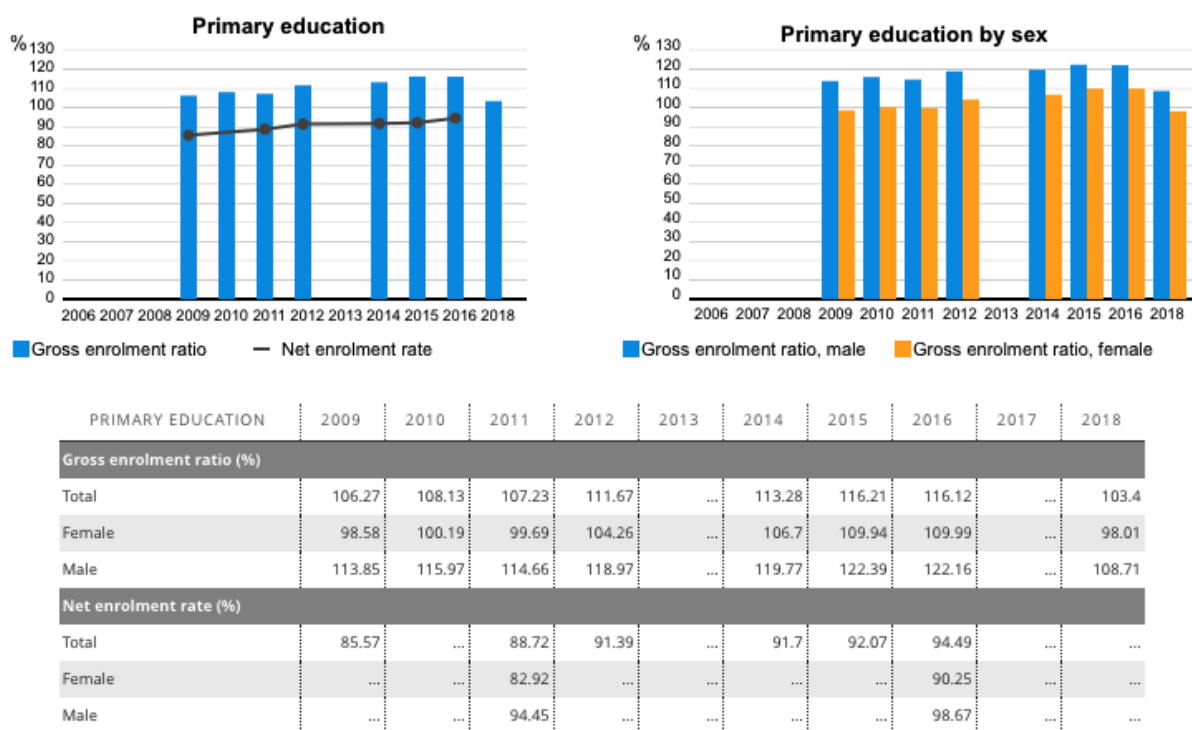
It becomes clear that many more girls than boys are not accessing primary education. The reasons being those that have been discussed above.

From 2006 to 2018, UNESCO UIS presents a graphic on actual participation of Cameroonian children in education, beginning with an overall enrollment rate, then moving on to enrollment by sex. Figure 4.2 shows that even in 2018, girls' enrollment in



primary school lags behind those of boys. The reasons for this too have also been discussed above.

**Figure 4.2 Cameroon: Participation in Primary Education from 2006 – 2018**



Source: “Cameroon.” UNESCO UIS, April 12, 2017. <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/cm?theme=education-and-literacy>.

Both CHRDA and Welisane Foundation partner with UN bodies and other international and local instruments in their fight to eradicate violence against girls and women, to enable education of all girls, and to assist in providing sustainable development for all. CHRDA carries out workshops to sensitize women, girls and men on their rights. Since 2016, their services are basically in capacity building, empowerment on conflict resolution management, and gender-based violence through the use of methods

provided by UN Security Management on Women's Peace and Security. They receive grants from the US Embassy in Yaoundé, the UN Trust Fund on Ending Violence against Women and Girls, from donors from the United States, from Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), from internal partners which include Civil Society Organizations and other local NGOs who attend training sessions at CHRDA or Welisane Foundation or provide finances or staffing when needed during events.

Through these partnerships with international bodies and local NGOs, and through their intensive work with target communities, CHRDA and Welisane Foundation are working with the UN and practicing the tenets of Third World/African feminisms. They are using practical, hands-on methods of empowerment that build on, and sustain the personal, educational, and financial growth of girls and women in Cameroon.

## Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

My focus on the African girl child is mainly an appeal for change and a call for African states to actively participate in the fight to eradicate violence against girls and women. The role African states play in the violation of the rights of the girl is one that needs international intervention. How the States promote gendered violence through their institutions, laws, corruption, patriarchy, and through lack of regulations that protect the girl child in schools, at home and in their communities are all points of contention. Through their actions, African states rob the girl child not only of her basic rights to education, but of her agency. Two scholars who have animated my interest in understanding how governments assist in the victimization of women and girls are Andrea Smith and Angela Davis. Andrea Smith (2005) on the one hand, writes about women of color who are caught in the intersections of gender and race, whose communities “often advocate that women keep silent about sexual and domestic violence” for reasons such as protecting the community from outside criticism or keeping with tradition (Smith 2005, 3). This is the kind of gender politics that is practiced in Cameroon.

On the other hand, Angela Davis writes about sterilization abuse and abortion rights in minority groups in the U.S and in Latin America. Davis’ piece titled “Reproductive Rights,” tells a story of forced sterilization and abortions carried out on the minority groups of women in and around the United States. Davis exposes the manipulations by the state in individual lives and as a result, shows how the state assists in the victimization of women and girls (Davis 1983). With regards to Cameroon, Davis’ piece is an eye opener because it reveals that states and governments, communities and leaders, have

control over the lives of their female citizens and they promote the victimization of girls through lack of adequate policy and through patriarchy.

### ***Significance of this Research Study***

This study will be the first of its kind to be carried out in the English language and will provide reference material for other Cameroonian graduate students and scholars who intend to research on the status of the girl child in Cameroon. The result of this study will help shed light on the issue of violence against girls in Cameroon. It will provide an in depth understanding of the reasons behind girls' under-enrollment and drop-out rates in primary schools. Another of my intentions at the end of this thesis is to establish why Girls/Girlhood Studies as a field of study would be a significant addition to Cameroonian universities' curriculum, and how this can aid in empowering the African girl child.

### ***Is Violence/Abuse keeping Cameroonian Girl Children out of Primary Schools?***

All four participants in this research study agree that today, violence against girls is a contributing factor that inhibits girls' access to primary education in Cameroon. Since the beginning of the Anglophone Crisis in 2016, my participants fear that the constant increase in the cases of rape of girl children, the effect of poverty, internal conflict, ignorance due to lack of education of care givers, all combine to worsen the status of girl children in Cameroon. Comparing the situation to that of Malawi, my participants acknowledge that the Cameroonian case is not as severe. They also agree that if the situation is not curbed, primary schools which are already unsafe spaces for girls, will be more so in the near future. At the moment, primary schools are unsafe for girls due to the

conflict between the separatists and the military. Girls are used as spoils of war, molested, assaulted and raped in order to force parents to adhere to the demands of both parties at war. A girl caught in the crossfire is considered to be disobedient and used as a lesson for others. Unfortunately, there are those who use situations of conflict to further their own agenda. My participants recount situations where thieves break into houses, steal whatever valuables they find, and rape all the female in the household. Joy recounts a case in which three girls were raped by men wearing masks in their own home and one of the girls has to be admitted into a psychiatric unit due to her catatonic state at home and at school. The other two girls are struggling with their schoolwork and threaten to drop out because they cannot cope with their experience with sexual abuse. Grassroots advocates help in this process, and also provide assistance to the victims by providing resources or directing them to available help centers such as hospitals and survival counseling support systems.

The current situation with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation of girl child access to education in Cameroon. As of March 2020, the Cameroon government in an attempt to contain the spread of the corona virus, has closed all schools in Cameroon. Being an under-developed country that is not as technologically advanced like the U.S, Cameroonian children are not privileged to continue their schooling using online methods. Parents are now called upon to educate their children at home with the aid of school material acquired at the beginning of the school year. What this means is that in the Southwest and Northwest Regions where schools have been mostly closed since that beginning of the Anglophone Crisis in 2016, those schools that could

partially open their doors to students due to their protected situations by the military, have now officially closed as well. The conflict situation already perpetuated illiteracy through the closing of schools. Today, the corona virus is keeping girls out of schools. As evidence from this study has shown, many Cameroonian girl children will not return to school after this new crisis is over.

### **Solutions by Grassroot advocates**

In 2016, the UN implemented the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that replaced the MDGs that ran its course in 2015. The SDGs are seventeen calls to action to end poverty and secure peace and prosperity for all people until the year 2030. The United Nations Development Fund (UNDP) report that due to the MDGs, the number of out of school children dropped by half during the fifteen years period that the MDGs ran. The SDGs have incorporated the MDGs with an emphasis on ending worldwide poverty (undp.org SDG 2020).

It is noteworthy to mention at this point that, I am carrying out this research in the year 2020, which also marks the fifth year of the SDGs, which has as its fifth goal the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Thus, moving from the MDGs to SDGs, grassroots NGOs in Cameroon are implementing strategies of the UN's SDGs, to ensure that the fifth goal, most especially, is realized. All participants I interviewed informed me of projects they carry out through their organizations that help the girls in their communities to fend for themselves. Underprivileged girls are not only taught skills that they can use to sustain themselves and their families, they are also encouraged to access education.

### ***Sustainable Assistance***

Ginger and Joy work with an NGO that aims at empowering girls through their praxis. CHRDA has opened an empowerment center for the IDPs, especially for the girls who cannot go to school. This center aims at occupying girls by taking them away from the streets thereby removing them from situations in which they can be violated. CHRDA teaches these girls a practical skill or a trade which they can use to sustain themselves and their families. Additionally, girls are taught in this empowerment center on various pressing points such as the ills of teenage pregnancy, sexual and reproductive rights, and health issues surrounding girls' bodies.

Presently, girls are learning tailoring skills at this empowerment center. Ginger is in the process of gaining approval in making the empowerment center a two-shift kind of establishment that would give same opportunities to girls who can afford to come in the morning periods, and also to those who can only afford to attend the afternoon sessions. This way, Ginger expects that they would be able to help more girls. When the tailoring sessions are over, Ginger and Joy are working on their next projects and skills the girls could learn.

### ***Education and Health Assistance***

Through their One Girl One Dream project, Welisane Foundation sets out to reduce the percentage of illiteracy of Cameroonian girls, which UNESCO stated to be at 70 percent. Since primary school education is mostly free with low or no tuition in some parts of the country, they identify girls from their target communities who really want to go to school and provide them with back-to-school materials. Girls from poverty-stricken families,

IDP girls, orphans, returning dropouts, all receive educational assistance from the One Girl One Dream project.

The issue of menstruation is still a major setback in Cameroon on girls' education. Girls are not schooled on their reproductive rights. Some leave school when they begin menstruating. All four participants mention their involvement in enlightening both boys and girls on the naturalness of menstruation. Ginger tells of girls being shamed at school by boys when they are on their period, and this makes them avoid school during that time, then lose six or more days of attending school. Ginger insists that even though menstruation is not a direct contributing factor to girls' victimization in schools, it is unfortunately a contributing factor to girl's school dropout rates. As a result, the empowerment center at CHRDA also teaches on menstruation hygiene, sexual and reproductive rights, and school related gender-based violence. When girls are bullied or shamed at school due to natural processes such as menstruation, they lose their self-esteem and run away from school.

Lisa and Jasmine explain that their NGO carries out sexual and reproductive rights projects that are meant to fight against girls' absenteeism from school due to menstruation. They sensitize girls on the importance of menstrual hygiene and on the naturalness of menstruation. One of the projects carried out by Welisane Foundation every year on the 28<sup>th</sup> of May, which is the International Day of Menstrual Hygiene, is to distribute reusable pads to underprivileged IDP girls who cannot afford sanitary towels. The Foundation produces these reusable pads by partnering with other international organizations and NGOs to bring these pads to girls at a minimal cost. These other NGOs distribute



these pads to girls in their target communities depending on their agenda. This project is of great importance to Lisa because “African girls still miss school because they cannot afford sanitary towels.” This is one of the ways this Foundation helps to keep girls in school.

With regard to their projects on advocacy, Lisa and Jasmine’s NGO tackle the phenomenon of early pregnancies by running a program from June through September each year titled “Vacance sans Grossesse” (pregnancy-free holidays) which is a mentorship program for girls during the summer holidays. During this time, they teach girls the importance of education, the ways to avoid early pregnancies, and the dangers of early pregnancies. Early pregnancy is a serious problem that can ruin a girl’s life in Africa.

Lisa and Jasmine’s NGO also partners with hospitals and health centers to which they refer cases of abused girls who need medical attention. They have contact with doctors who treat these girls for a minimal cost that is covered by the NGO. These doctors provide girls with contraceptives, treatment in case of sexual abuse, and they also conduct health checks.

### ***Anti-Violence Assistance***

As far as rape, coercion and bullying of primary school girls are concerned, Ginger and Lisa explain that their NGOs are engaged in proposing and implementing a law that allows pregnant girls to continue to attend school while pregnant. The tendency in Cameroon is that when girls that young get pregnant, Ginger explains, their parents pull them out of school and save the school expenditure because they see no reason for the girl to continue her education. They declare the girl ruined and she should stay home and later

on take care of her child when it is born. Also, school administrations dismiss pregnant girls from school once their situation is revealed. Many of these girls never get the chance to return to school. Ginger informed me that they have had some success because a few government schools in their target communities have accepted to continue the enrollment of pregnant girls, a situation that was not encouraged a decade or so ago. What needs to be done is encouraging and educating parents on the fact that a pregnant girl can still attend school. Parents have to be taught that their child's pregnancy is not a cause for shame or disgrace and the girl does not need to bear the burden of parenting alone. Thus, Ginger and Lisa sensitize parents on the need for educating their girl children even when pregnant. They sensitize parents on the fact that when they stop the girl child's education due to pregnancy, the boy who got her pregnant continues his education. Most boys in such situations abandon the girls and their offspring becomes the burden of the girl's parents. Grassroot advocates make sure parents understand that they can help their child fight for her rights. She does not have to raise her offspring by herself or just with the help of her family. The boy's parents could equally help so that the girl can continue her schooling.

### ***Legal Assistance***

Ginger and Joy explain that they have a legal department in their NGO that handles cases of sexual assault and rape for the girls they work with on pro bono basis. Sexually assaulted girls get the necessary assistance they need in legal, counselling, and medical matters. In cases where the perpetrator is caught, the legal department represent the abused girl and fight for her rights. These assaulted girls are thereafter sensitized on how

to avoid dangerous situations, how to react when they have been violated, and they are given resources on where to find help in the case of abuse. This information is also given to the girls at the empowerment center for prevention purposes and so they are aware of the dangers that can befall girls, especially those in their vulnerable situations.

### ***Grassroots Advocates and African Feminisms***

The local NGOs and the advocates for women and girl children this study has examined are practicing African feminisms in the ways described by Nnaemeka and the other African feminist scholars discussed in Chapter Three. These grassroots advocates are on the ground looking for solutions and offering services that provide aid to girls and women who need them. My participants are practicing feminism of negotiation, of compromise, of nurturing. They actively engage communities, schools, churches, men and boys, in order to sensitize the population on issues affecting girls and women. They do not only target women and girls, they target all adults and youths in their struggle by actively involving all in the fight against violence against girls and women, poverty, and in their struggle to promote the education of the girl child.

### ***Recommendations***

My participants recommend that more women and men should get involved in the fight to end violence against girls in Cameroon. As grassroot advocates for girls and women, they are doing their part, but more has to be done. When I asked Joy what her reward is for doing this work, if it is the monetary benefits or other benefits, Joy told me that there is no monetary benefit high enough to compensate the work they are doing. It is a calling

that you respond to, Joy explains. It is not the kind of job you do if you do not believe in social justice. Ginger calls for more women to join in social justice work in Cameroon. Lisa echoes her colleagues when she calls for not only women but also men to join in the fight to end violence against girls for as she explains, adults must partner with youth to effect change. Men have to understand that there is a benefit when they partner with women to end gender-based violence, and that there is a benefit in educating their girl children.

My recommendation ties in with those of my participants in that I believe that adults partnering with youth to end the victimization of the African girl child is the crux of the matter. Getting Cameroonian men involved as much as possible is the only way of changing their mindset. Education plays a role in this. Until the majority of Cameroonian men, women and children are educated, there will not be any effective change. Education is the key.

In the area of higher education, an introduction of the academic field of Girls/Girlhood Studies into the university curriculum would be a good initiative in the empowerment of girls in the country. Girls/Girlhood Studies is a field that centers girls' lived experiences and could address concepts such as patriarchy, violence against girls, sexual assault, reproductive rights, among others. This field could be used to gradually effect change on certain traditional beliefs and practices that oppress girls and women. Centering on girls' experiences could force male students to become aware of how oppressive the culture is and could lead to a gradual dismantling of patriarchy.

As far as the government is concerned, there has been improvements especially with the passage of the law that prohibits rape and the law that prohibits corporal punishment. Violence against girls with regard to rape is being punished in Cameroonian courts when reported. Grassroots advocates report of a military soldier who raped a girl in Buea, was reported to his superiors and summoned to Yaoundé where he faced trial for rape.

The abolition of corporal punishment by the Cameroon government has helped reduce the rate of physical violence on girls. Beatings are no longer common, and girls would thrive if they did not have other societal pressures applied on them.

Grassroots advocates recommend more work with international organizations such as the UN and WHO to curb violence against girls in Cameroon. They also encourage partnership with concerned local ministries such as the Ministries of Women's Empowerment and the Family, Basic Education, Public Health, Social Affairs, and Youth Affairs, to find solutions to pertinent issues concerning girls and women. Primary schools in Cameroon have become very unsafe for girls and the tendencies are on a rise.

For further research on this topic, I would recommend field work. Researchers would achieve much more if they were present while these grassroots advocates go about their daily duties. First-hand and eye-witness information would be advantageous to the development of Girls/Girlhood Studies as a field of study in Cameroon's higher education. By using questionnaires and conducting surveys, researchers could include girls' opinions with the consent of adults responsible for them. Through this method, girls' experiences would be highlighted alongside those of grassroots advocates.

## Appendix A: IRB Approval



February 18, 2020

Dear Maria Bevacqua:

Re: IRB Proposal entitled "[1538638-3] The Victimization of the African Girl Child: Primary Schools as Unsafe Spaces for Girls in Cameroon."

Review Level: Level [II]

Your IRB Proposal has been approved as of February 10, 2020. On behalf of the Minnesota State University, Mankato IRB, we wish you success with your study. Remember that you must seek approval for any changes in your study, its design, funding source, consent process, or any part of the study that may affect participants in the study (see <https://grad.mnsu.edu/irb/revision.html>). Should any of the participants in your study suffer a research-related injury or other harmful outcome, you are required to report them to the Associate Vice-President of Research and Dean of Graduate Studies immediately at 507-389-1242.

When you complete your data collection or should you discontinue your study, you must submit a Closure request (see <https://grad.mnsu.edu/irb/closure.html>). All documents related to this research must be stored for a minimum of three years following the date on your Closure request. Please include your IRBNet ID number with any correspondence with the IRB.

The Principal Investigator (PI) is responsible for maintaining signed consent forms in a secure location at the university for 3 years following the submission of a Closure request. If the PI leaves the university before the end of the 3-year timeline, he/she is responsible for following "Consent Form Maintenance" procedures posted online (see <http://grad.mnsu.edu/irb/storingconsentforms.pdf>).

Cordially,

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Minnesota State University, Mankato IRB's records.

The image shows three handwritten signatures in black ink. From left to right: the first signature is 'Mary Hadley', the second is 'Bonnie Berg', and the third is 'Jeffrey Buchanan'. The signatures are written in a cursive, flowing style. A vertical line is placed between the second and third signatures.

Bonnie Berg, Ph.D. IRB Co-Chair

Jeffrey Buchanan, Ph.D. Mary Hadley, FACN, Ph.D. IRB Co-Chair IRB Director

## Appendix B: Consent Form

### CONSENT FORM FOR A TELEPHONE/VIDEO INTERVIEW

IRBNet ID Number: 1538638

I invite you to participate in my research study titled, “The Victimization of the African Girl Child: Primary Schools as Unsafe Spaces for Girls in Cameroon.” This research is being conducted under the guidance of Dr. Maria Bevacqua in the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies, Minnesota State University, Mankato.

The purpose of this research is to understand the types of abuse experienced by girl children in Cameroon; to understand whether abuse inhibits girls’ access to primary education; and to understand how grassroots advocates such as yourself, are involved in preventing or responding to abuse of girls.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked a series of seven questions that throw light on your advocacy work with girls. Participation in this study is voluntary and you have the right to stop at any time. Please speak out this wish during the interview, and I will immediately stop the interview. If any of my interview questions lead to any form of stress as you recall incidents that have occurred, you may ask that I pause the interview, skip the question, or discontinue the interview. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with Minnesota State University, Mankato, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. There are no direct benefits to you as a result of participation in this study. You will receive a copy of this consent form by email, which you will sign, and return via email to my supervisor Dr. Maria Bevacqua at [bevacqua@mnsu.edu](mailto:bevacqua@mnsu.edu).

As a participant, you may choose if we should conduct the interview over the telephone or through Zoom video conferencing, which are the two media available to me. This choice was given to you during recruitment and it is stated in the recruitment script that I used. I will use the medium that you chose. We also decided on possible interview dates and times during recruitment. This information is also included in your recruitment script. I will record the interview with a recording device. If you choose not to be audio recorded, you may still participate in this research study by dictating your answers to me during our telephone interview. The interview might take longer than an hour since I will have to read back your answers to you for confirmation. To facilitate this, I will forward you the interview questions a few days before the day of our interview. If you have any questions about participants’ rights and for research-related injuries, please contact the Administrator of the Institutional Review Board at (507) 389-1242.

By participating in this research, your organization will gain scholarly exposure and you will be contributing to academic knowledge on your country, Cameroon. The risks of participating in this study are about the same as are encountered in daily life. If you chose to participate but remain anonymous, then there will be no indirect benefits for the organization you work with.



Your Name (Printed) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

As participants, none of your answers will be released and no names will be recorded other than on this form, which will be kept separate from your interview recordings. All information gathered from this interview as shared by you, will be kept in a safe place by my supervisor, Dr. Maria Bevacqua. After this research study ends this spring semester 2020, all consent forms will be stored in a locked file cabinet in a locked room to which only the Principal Investigator has access. After three years, in the fall of 2023, all information, including all consent forms, will be destroyed.

If you have any further questions about this research study, please contact the Principal Investigator or Student Investigator at:

Principal Investigator  
Dr. Maria Bevacqua  
109 Morris Hall  
507-389-5025  
[bevacqua@mnsu.edu](mailto:bevacqua@mnsu.edu)

Student Investigator  
Sandra Nambangi Kruch  
109 Morris Hall  
507-389-5025  
[Sandra.kruch@mnsu.edu](mailto:Sandra.kruch@mnsu.edu)

If you are at least 18 years old and agree to participate in this research study, please fill in the blanks below. This is to ascertain that you are an adult and a member of the community you serve. Please sign below and return the signed copy via email to Dr. Bevacqua. Please keep a copy for your records.

Name	
Age	
Nationality	
Residence	
Place of Activism	

Do you wish to remain anonymous in this research study?

\_\_\_\_\_ YES. \_\_\_\_\_ NO. Your Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Your Name (Printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Your Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Minnesota State University, Mankato IRBNet ID # 1538638

Date of Minnesota State University, Mankato IRB approval: February 10, 2020

## Appendix C: Email Recruitment Script

### Email Recruitment

Hello Mr./Ms.,

My names are Sandra Nambangi Kruch and I am a graduate student at the Minnesota State University, Mankato. I invite you to participate in a research study on the abuse of girls in Cameroon. The research project is being supervised by Dr. Maria Bevacqua.

If you agree to participate you will be asked questions about your work with girls in Cameroon and how you advocate for them. All your responses will be kept confidential and can only be reviewed by me and my supervisor Dr. Bevacqua. The interview will be conducted one on one with you, over a mutually agreed-upon medium (phone or over Zoom video conferencing) by me, in a quiet study room at the Minnesota State University library in Mankato. Please state in your response if you prefer to be interviewed over the telephone or through Zoom and give me available dates and times within the next two weeks for the interview.

You can contact Dr. Bevacqua at 507-389-5025 or [bevacqua@mnsu.edu](mailto:bevacqua@mnsu.edu) about any concerns you have about this research project. If you have any questions about participants' rights and for research-related injuries, please contact the Administrator of the Institutional Review Board at 507-389-1242.

I will provide you with a consent form which you will read and sign before the interview can take place. This is to give you sufficient time to contact Dr. Bevacqua in case you have additional questions concerning this study.

Participation in this interview is voluntary and to qualify for this interview, you must be an adult above 18 working with a non-profit organization that empowers girls in Cameroon. During the interview, you will answer seven questions that will be based on your work with primary school-level girls.

Thank you for your time.

Best regards

Sandra Nambangi Kruch

IRBNet ID Number: 1538638

Date of Minnesota State University, Mankato IRB approval: February 10, 2020

## Appendix D: Telephone Recruitment Script

### Telephone Recruitment

Hello,

My names are Sandra Nembang Kruch and I am a Cameroonian graduate student at the Minnesota State University, Mankato. I am calling because I want to invite you to participate in a research study on the abuse of girls in Cameroon. This research study is actually part of my Thesis project needed to complete my Master of Science degree at the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at the Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Your participation will be in the form of an interview. I will be asking you a series of seven questions that will center on your work in advocating for girls in Cameroon. All your responses will be kept confidential and can only be reviewed by me and my supervisor Dr. Bevacqua for analysis purposes. I will interview you over the phone or through a zoom video call, if you prefer, in a private study room at our university library and you can decide if you want the interview to be recorded or not, and if you want to be anonymous. Please indicate now if you prefer to be interviewed over the telephone or through Zoom and give me available dates and times within the next two weeks for the interview.

You can contact my supervisor Dr. Bevacqua at 507-389-5025 or [bevacqua@mnsu.edu](mailto:bevacqua@mnsu.edu) about any concerns you may have about this research project. I will provide you with a consent form which you will read and sign before the interview can take place. This is to give you sufficient time to contact Dr. Bevacqua in case you have additional questions concerning this study.

If you agree to participate in this study, you can tell me right now or email me at [Sandra.kruch@mnsu.edu](mailto:Sandra.kruch@mnsu.edu) or Dr. Bevacqua at [bevacqua@mnsu.edu](mailto:bevacqua@mnsu.edu) with your decision, and provide us with an email address through which I or Dr. Bevacqua can send you the consent form and answers to any additional questions you may have about the study. So, what do you say?

Thank you for your time.

Best regards

Sandra Nembang Kruch

IRBNet ID Number: 1538638

Date of Minnesota State University, Mankato IRB approval: February 10, 2020

## Appendix E: Interview Questions

### Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in my research study: “The Victimization of the African Girl Child: Primary Schools as Unsafe Spaces for Girls in Cameroon.” The research study is in partial fulfillment for a Master of Science Degree at the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies, Minnesota State University, Mankato. (Email them the consent form, read it to them, and have them sign it. After they have signed it and sent it back, begin recording the interview).

1.   a. What is your job and how long have you been working in this field?  
       b. In which parts of Cameroon do you carry out your work and what circumstances motivated you to work in these areas?
2.   a. Which of these services does your organization provide: enforcement, empowerment, legal or humanitarian services? Can you elaborate on the nature of these services?  
       b. Since your organization is a non-governmental organization, how do you finance the work you do?
3.   a. What is the age range of the girls you work with?  
       b. What is the school drop-out rates for the girls you work with and what are the reasons for their dropping-out?
4.   What kinds of abuse are girls subjected to and what is the impact on their education?
5.   How do you work with girls to prevent abuse?
6.   What changes have you brought to the lives of the girls you work with; do you have any testimonies?
7.   What is your aim or your reward for doing this work?

Minnesota State University, Mankato IRBNet ID # 1538638

Date of Minnesota State University, Mankato IRB approval: February 10, 2020

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